

The Bed Book of Short Stories



*Edited by
Joanne Hichens*

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

*The Bed Book
of Short Stories*

The Bed Book of Short Stories



*Compiled by Lauri Kubuitsile
Edited by Joanne Hichens*



Publication © Modjaji Books 2010
Copyright © 2010 is held by the author of each story

First published in 2010 by Modjaji Books CC
P O Box 385, Athlone, 7760, South Africa
modjaji.books@gmail.com
<http://modjaji.book.co.za>

ISBN 978-1-920397-31-9

Book design: Natascha Mostert
Cover artwork and lettering: Hannah Morris
Copy editor: Maire Fisher

Printed and bound by Mega Digital, Cape Town
Set in Garamond

*The publication of this book was made possible by generous
sponsorship from the Arts & Culture Trust*



Contents

Introduction	
Making the bed ... <i>Joanne Hichens</i>	9
Bedrock <i>Joanne Fedler</i>	14
In the Spirit of McPhineas Lata <i>Lauri Kubuitsile</i>	23
Desire, with Borders <i>Arja Salafranca</i>	32
Stains Like a Map <i>Jayne Bauling</i>	40
Sleeping through Heartbreak <i>Marina Chichava</i>	51
A Natural Combination <i>Pamela Newham</i>	59
The Artful Craft of Quilting <i>Anne Woodborne</i>	72
The Capable Wife <i>Rita Britz</i>	86
Lie Still Heart: Scenes from a Girlhood Devoured <i>Gothataone Moeng</i>	92

Every Picture Tells ... <i>Romaine Hill</i>	101
To Own a Bed <i>Sylvia Schlettwein</i>	110
A Requiem for Daniel <i>Luso Katali Mnthali</i>	117
Lena My Lovely <i>Rosemund Handler</i>	129
Heaven (or Something Like It) <i>Sarah Lotz</i>	141
Crazy <i>Helen Walne</i>	152
Hunters and Lovers <i>Nia Magoulaniiti-McGregor</i>	160
On a Broomstick <i>Liesel Jobson</i>	173
Nompumelelo Sinxoto's Bed <i>Karabo Moleke</i>	183
Imagining Monsters <i>Margot Saffer</i>	190
The Outsider <i>Isabella Morris</i>	197
Chickens and the Clinking of Glass <i>Megan Ross</i>	206

Fool's Gold <i>Tinashe Chidyausiku</i>	215
In Sickness <i>Melissa Gardiner</i>	221
Wings on Indi's Pillow <i>Claudie Muchindu</i>	229
How to Write a Good Romance <i>Ginny Swart</i>	236
In Bed with Ikeji <i>Nqovuyo Rosa Tshuma</i>	245
Portrait of a Woman in Bed <i>Bronwyn McLennan</i>	259
Mary, Mary <i>Rose Richards</i>	269
Made of Mukwa <i>Ellen Banda-Aaku</i>	280
Goodnight, Sleep Tight <i>Joanne Hichens</i>	288
Divine Possibilities, Rewards Uncertain <i>Erika Coetzee</i>	296
Author Biographies	306

Making the bed ...

Joanne Hichens

‘Bed’, for me, is synonymous with respite, relief, with peace at the end of a hectic day; in bed I can rest and fade from reality, and though I celebrate life, I can take a break from all the responsibilities which come part and parcel with it.

Even as a child I would look forward to going to bed, not to sleep or to dream, but to read late into the night – till at least ten o’clock! – with a flashlight under the covers. My mother encouraged me to heed her warnings to sleep rather than to strain my eyes. But I didn’t listen. And I think secretly she must have been pleased that I loved reading so much. Who knows if the hours spent flashing that torch in the dark and squinting at small type contributed to a genetic predisposition to short-sightedness, but I was awarded a pair of nerdy specs as badge of honour at the tender age of eight.

If I think of all the beds I’ve known, they include this Queen marital bed I’m lying on right now. Here, my legs are stretched out under the duvet, my lap top is humming and warming my thighs, my husband is snoring next to me, the cat momentarily distracts me from work as he jumps at the cursor moving across the screen. Other beds that come to mind? A childhood pine bunk-bed, from which my siblings and I attempted somersaults from up top – how could my mother have allowed such death-defying feats, I wonder now? I think of a creaky wrought iron and brass bed my brother conned me into buying for top dollar from his student junk dealership. I remember hotel beds – cringing at the thought of countless bodies before me leaving their residue in some form or other in beds for hire. I remember makeshift beds – appreciating a starry night sky from a sleeping bag on a camp bed; and curling up on the back seat of a car once, a towel as blanket, waking to excruciatingly stiff limbs.

The most life changing moments of my existence are associated with bed. I gave birth, three times, in hospital beds, and cared for each of my babies for the first few days of their lives right there in those steel-sided beds with their rustling plastic mattress covers and starched sheets. And I will never forget the hospice bed in which my mother recently died. A hand-crafted crocheted blanket lovingly laid over her as she slept through her last days spoke of the personal care she received as a patient at St Luke's; I was at my mother's bedside through her restlessness, her pain, indeed with Bed stories, waiting for quiet hours during which I could edit whilst keeping vigil; I remembered my mother spending time at my bed-side when I was ill as a child, smoothing a fevered brow as I suffered mumps to migraines; it was my turn now to give comfort.

There are so many beds! But one thing is clear. Although a bed, dressed in hand sewn quilt or threadbare blanket, may in and of itself be memorable, it is what happens there, in the bed – the sex and lovemaking, the dreams, the flashlight reading hours, the nightmares, the rest, giving birth and dying – which give 'bed' special meaning. Whether a bed is shared with a book, a child, a pet or a partner – whether lovers lie in ecstasy or indifference, whether they relate bed to intimacy or betrayal – or whether we lie alone in a bed – ah, bliss for some! – it is memories and recollections of 'bed', in whatever form, which have in some way triggered the writing of fiction stories for this anthology.

'When I was playing with the idea of a themed collection,' says publisher Colleen Higgs, 'I kept coming back to something concrete – shoes, pillow, bed, table. And finally it was Bed. Although I was wary of the stories being too explicit about sex, it seemed just the right theme to capture the imagination of readers and writers alike.'

Looking a little bit more closely at how 'Bed' was made, apart from wanting to compile and publish a diverse collection of stories, Colleen Higgs's desire was to afford lesser known writers and new writers an opportunity to engage with an editor. Firstly, with the theme decided, a little under two years ago, entries were called for by Modjaji Books. Writers put pen to paper to discover which fictional stories lay in bed for them, and the submissions came in thick and fast.

'What really appealed to me was the thought of seeing the world from the 'other' side,' says Lauri Kubuitsile, who compiled the selection from over four hundred stories. 'As a writer, I've not been immune to

imagining the people receiving my own submissions as fanged and prone to carrying pitch forks. Overall I liked the process. I learned a lot. It was difficult to send rejections because I know how some people are affected by such things, but all published writers I've met have the skin of elephants, the only way to survive; developing it sooner would be advisable. I discovered too, as I read, that when given a theme such as this, it is best for writers to sideswipe it a bit. Let the scent of it waft through your story. This is where the writer will find a place that is hers alone; these were often the stories I liked best.'

As South Africans, we have the distinct privilege of being exposed to, and being part of the fabric made up of a range of cultures. Inviting writers from beyond the borders to submit work meant that stories were drawn from an even more vast store of experience. 'I wanted,' says Colleen, 'to be particularly sensitive to new writers and writers from Southern African countries other than South Africa, and to showcase unique voices.' Indeed, according to Colleen and Lauri, there were many excellent submissions, too many to give credit to.

My job then involved a two-fold task: firstly to consider each story as a whole, to look at the bigger picture so to speak, in order to improve structure and flow of story, and then to move on to a fine-tuning process which involved a careful evaluation of style and language. On this note I thank Maire Fisher for the meticulous job she has done not only on copy editing, but in casting a second eye over the stories.

A number of new writers used feedback brilliantly to take their stories to the next level and it was indeed gratifying as editor to read a second draft which had developed so far from a first submission.

Claudie Muchindu wrote in an email that the experience had put to rest the illusion she had 'that writing is merely a flash of genius; that writing involved simply transferring all from my head onto paper, and that was all I had to do!' Indeed, this is one of the most important lessons for any writer to learn along the way – perhaps after developing that thick skin! – that there is a distinct difference between the art and craft of writing. Unless dictation is taken from God, and it might well be that Dame Edna O'Brien remains the only writer who has been lucky enough to have a direct line, even flashes of creative genius will be well served by editing.

What is this 'genius' then? It is the 'feeling' that grabs a writer in the gut, that when translated into words is often referred to as 'voice', the

unique and personal way that each writer has of telling a story. I believe genius resides in all of us, and is the place perhaps from whence the kernel of a story comes, but genius will undoubtedly be enhanced, after what are often the first frantic attempts to capture the story, by careful attention to the craft – the rewriting of a story, the cutting, the polishing which makes it shine with a life of its own.

To stick with the nuts and bolt of writing, regardless of mother tongue, good writing is not necessarily complex writing, or use of florid language; it is not peppered with adjectives and adverbs, or pretention. Good writing has as much to do with rhythm and style as with content. As a writer works towards making a story which will read as a coherent whole, she will, with conscious effort, examine every word and mark used to craft her story. Good writing, above all, is writing which comes from the heart. And of heart there is plenty in the *Bed Book*.

Lauri Kubuitsile wrote on her blog, that the process of compiling the stories ‘has made me a better writer and I thank Modjaji Books for that.’ As editor, I echo that sentiment. As I have looked critically – not with criticism, but with a constructive eye – at another’s work, editing for me is akin to experiencing the heart of a story, and finding a way to strengthen that heart, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity of connecting with a group of such talented and enthusiastic writers.

Indeed, whether ‘bed’ has conjured up for the writers of the stories the super-comfort of a luxurious Sealy Posturpedic mattress that takes the shape under the very curves of the body, or has brought to mind a cheap strip of foam rubber through which can be felt every stone; whether ‘bed’ is the back of a bakkie, or the floor, as the writers have allowed their imaginations to wander in and out of bed they have lifted the concrete idea of bed to the next level.

Ginny Swart writes of an inspirational pink chaise longue, Erika Coetzee of magical creativity triggered whilst being in bed; Tinashe Chidyausiku writes of respite in sleep after a numbing day’s work, and Jayne Bauling’s bed goes on a gruelling journey. Joanne Fedler’s story of personal sadness is rooted in bedrock; Rose Richards’ twisted tale in the flower bed. Pamela Newham’s email love story will have you smiling, as will Sarah Lotz as the Adele of her story enjoys a long term affair with not only her bed, but her TV. At the furthest extreme, ‘bed’ is linked to fear rather than comfort, with the terror of abuse rather than nurturing. Karabo Moleke and Gothataone Moeng expose abuse of young

INTRODUCTION

children, and Anne Woodborne and Sylvia Schlettwein both explore the abuse of women, so prevalent in our society. As I recall my personal and profound experience of my mother's death-bed, it is no wonder too that many writers, including Ellen Banda-Aaku, Liesl Jobson and Luso Katali Mnthali chose an aspect of dying as inspiration for their stories. Whatever the starting point however, and there are too many stories to touch on here, there is a fabulous lot of stories now waiting for you, the reader, between the covers.

Still 'In bed', for me by far the most satisfying place to read, and even to work, a cocoon where I am relaxed and receptive to others' stories, I at last put the computer aside, having written this final tongue-twister of a line:

What better book to take to bed with you than the Bed Book of short stories, to ease you into sleep, and in some cases to keep you from it.

Enjoy!

Bedrock

Joanne Fedler

'I'm totally claustrophobic,' the woman in front of her giggles.

'No you're not,' her husband chides, slapping her on her bottom. The gesture almost jolts Virginia to a standstill, but there are people walking behind her and James the tour guide in his khaki uniform has instructed, 'keep moving.' The slap is one of such playful certainty, hinting at a shared history of anniversaries and ablutions, children in there too, no doubt, more than two, though the couple seem to be unaccompanied here in the cave. There must be grandparents somewhere, insisting they baby sit, to give them some 'much-needed time-out.' It is common knowledge parents need that. Space.

Virginia can't say if she is claustrophobic herself. She's never been this far inside a cave before. The little spelunking she did as a child along the coast of the Western Cape was hide-and-seek with bare-footed cousins, in sea-carved rocky alcoves. Nooks and crannies they made into 'beds' with towels and pretended they were fugitives. Places the daylight could reach. Not this deep penetration into the guts of the earth. Not this venturing so far from sunlight and oxygen and wind. In an organized group. With a tour-guide nogal. Where is the adventure in this?

As soon as the heavy reinforced refrigerator-like door behind them shuts tight with a suctioning clunk, she reaches behind her for Dave's hand, but he is holding the video camera to his eye, like some ghastly robotic ophthalmic extension. He is moving slowly from side to side to make sure he gets it all. 'Capturing,' he calls his documentation of their exploits, which, by the way, he takes very seriously. He has a daunting archive of movie clips – of their scuba-diving, rock-climbing, kayaking, camping. Filming is an extreme sport of its own. He is fastidious and vigilant about downloading the footage as if something might get inadvertently lost if he does not attend to this transfer. He chews away

hours on this assignment. Their history of weekends-away eats steadily at his computer memory, whilst all the time a mountain of memories is created. Some nights she finds him replaying them in the den, with a triple whiskey on ice. She can't bear to watch them. They seem desperate. Utterly pointless. Once upon a time she would have been able to muster compassion for this obsession. Now she just observes it with the kind of pity she might wring forth for an anorexic or a drug addict.

From the door, she watches. He looks up at her. 'See you in the morning,' she murmurs.

He waves at her. 'Don't wait up for me.'

He used to say, 'sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite.'

But perhaps that began to sound too childish, too hopeful.

Alone in her hollow king-size bed, she dreams of things with wings. Angels maybe. They touch her with their petal-like hands, they flutter around her like butterflies.

* * *

Hands matter to her more than she'd ever imagined. By her estimation, thalidomide had wreaked a wretched legacy on generations of people, and not just because they could never play tennis or swim. A person's entire character, like their history, their future, could be told in the hands. Who were you without your hands?

She had been standing in line at international departures, boarding for Katmandu. She needed to get away. It had been only six months since she and Patrick had broken up.

Dave – she didn't know his name then – had his back to her, but she could see him holding his boarding pass and passport which he was using as a bookmark in a small paperback, which later she glimpsed was Plato's Republic. She got stuck on them. His hands. The veins, sinew, the half moons of his cuticles. Okay, she admitted it, she was a phalange junkie. If she saw nothing more on a man, the hands would be enough.

She knew things from them. She could see the life in them, ingrained with silt. They were hands at ease in mud, not that they weren't clean. He was a scrubber. He took care of his nails. But you can't hide a history of dirt. She found herself imagining him – this stranger in the line in front of her – putting his fingers deep inside her. She blushed at

the thought of it. She was one up on Erica Jong's zipless fuck, this was a faceless fuck. Fingers and hands. What more did one need?

Science has given us all the answers. There's nothing mysterious about it at all. The brain releases pheromones which in turn create a chemical reaction. This is why he turned face her. And oh God he smiled. Could he read her thoughts?! Could he smell her imagining him fucking her with the generous width of his Peter Pointer and Tommy Thumb? Could he also see her arching, pushing down hard, climaxing around his fingers? She blushed brazenly. If his brain knew what his chemicals knew, he didn't give it away. He would be good with secrets.

'Have you read it?' he asked, mistaking her fixated gaze on his hands for a fascination with Plato.

'At university, it feels like a lifetime ago.'

'I'm still trying to work out if I understand the allegory of the cave ...' he confessed.

'That we're all prisoners, facing away from the light, watching shadows cast on the wall ...'

'You seem to get it.'

'I think I had to write an essay on it in philosophy.'

'It's kind of depressing, don't you think?'

'Not if it's true ... do you think it's true?'

'I haven't made up my mind yet.'

'I think you do get it,' she smiled, grateful to be thinking of Plato and not being finger fucked by this strange man. With his ... were those freckles? Sandy hair? No ear hair. Straight perfect teeth.

He was a landscape artist.

They exchanged details.

Twenty-four hours later, on a noisy bed in a hotel in Katmandu, sheets peeled back, she moaned as his fingers, as if they were slaves to her own private fantasies, pushed deep into her.

* * *

'If you just give me a moment, I'm going to put the lights on,' James's perky rehearsed voice comes from somewhere in the dark ahead like the voice of God in the wilderness before light was on his agenda. How many times a day must he reiterate the genealogy of these caves? Virginia

wonders if awe can be faked. He sounds genuinely fascinated by his own archeological account on endless repeat.

A series of clicks engage the light system, and suddenly they are in the bejeweled belly of the rock. Despite her sweater, Virginia shivers. If it is beautiful it is also strangely terrifying.

About 10 000 years ago, the Khoisan used the entrance of the caves as shelter. They never wandered deeper into the caves because of their superstitious nature.

Of course not, Virginia thinks. It is primal, this antipathy to delving too deep. It feels like trespassing. Some places are not meant to be made open to the public. Or unearthed. Or climbed. Dave's been talking about Kilimanjaro. As if people don't die of altitude sickness on its slopes.

'Why take the chance?' she asks.

'You can't live life from your bed,' he says.

Depends on your definition of 'life', she supposes.

In her bed, she's travelled to Middle Earth, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Tuscany, the Maldives, one page at a time. Books grow in piles, like untamed weeds at her bedside, half-read, waiting, re-read. She stops in at the library every Wednesday. It isn't sensible to buy books when you read them at the speed she does. It is wasteful, and they have already wasted enough money. If you find a book you simply desperately unremittingly need to have, well then, it could be purchased. But she's tamed the desire. Once you've read a book, it is that book itself, not some untouched pristine version off the shelf you want to own. Humans are territorial that way. It is the touching that makes something yours, not the price you pay for it.

Dave doesn't read anymore. Not since Plato.

She hates even thinking of it as a failing, because criticism is neither helpful nor fair in a relationship. It is misplaced. She must find the right place for the right things.

The past doesn't lose its integrity. Not even in the face of the painful present. Those are her therapist's words. And she is grateful to have them to grip between her fingers, on the edge of her tippy-toes, like handholds, footholds on a sheer cliff face.

It doesn't matter how late she reads. By the time Dave comes to bed, she is always asleep, her reading glasses skew from the droop of her neck. He used to take them off for her.

'I'm scared to wake you,' he says when she asks him why he no longer does.

* * *

His hand in the small of her back was warm, possessive. His other hand was clasped over her eyes.

'Not much further to go,' he'd said.

She had giggled, inebriated with anticipation.

'Okay, keep them closed, no cheating,' he said, removing his hands from her eyes. She kept them shut tight.

She heard him fumble with a key.

She tried not to pre-empt. That was a form of presumptuousness, and life is capricious and full of surprises. It was joyless to always be in the know. But she couldn't help telling her mother on the phone, 'I think he's going to do it this weekend.'

He wouldn't tell her where they were going, just that she didn't need pyjamas. 'I want you naked in my bed all weekend.'

He had driven her to a private game farm. They had taken a Land Rover to get to their room. Now, they were standing at a private bungalow that overlooked a watering hole. She could smell the animals watching them.

'No peeking,' he admonished.

Then, 'Okay, you can open them.'

The enormous bed was draped in a soft billow of gauze, held apart by large ties.

And the bed. Oh the bed. He must have collected those rose petals all year! The bed was covered, literally covered in a carpet of them. Pinks and splashes of red, and yellows and peach.

She'd stood frozen. She only realised in that moment that she had always trailed this moment. A bed made for love, for her.

The soft flesh of a million petals was cool on her bare back.

He gathered them up in handfuls and cascaded them onto her in a shower. He blew each one off with his hot breath.

When they emerged from their post coital sleep, the bed was a mass of bruised and browning leaves, fecund and lush.

‘I want you to share my bed for the rest of my life,’ he’d said, removing a small velvet box from a drawer.

* * *

For thousands of years, we believe the caves were unknown except to animals. According to legend, the caves were discovered in 1780.

These are some of the oldest limestone caves to be open to the public in the world, and of course the San people were the first to discover them.

‘Where are the bushman paintings?’ someone’s voice trails up from somewhere.

‘They’ve been damaged over time,’ James says. ‘But there used to be a whole lot of them around the entrance.’

‘What a pity,’ someone says.

‘Yes, it’s a tricky balance between preserving what’s here and opening it to the public. Please don’t touch the walls,’ James laughs, but there is authority in his voice. ‘We damage these formations inadvertently – just with our presence – the skin that comes off our bodies, the oil and acid on our skin, the dirt we carry.’

‘It is so beautiful,’ the woman ahead of her sighs.

‘Not as beautiful as you,’ her husband chaffs.

Is it beautiful? Virginia isn’t sure. Stalactites and stalagmites, the more unusual helictites, uncertain of which direction to grow, all formed over millions of years. Was that an exaggeration – *millions* of years? Like millions of sperm in one ejaculation? It seemed improbable. But science confirms this to be the case. Millions.

She never used to mind it on the sheets.

But that was when its value was undiscovered, latent and lost in an idyllic ignorance. Before test tubes and pipettes and injections and harvesting. Before it lost its mystery and became a solution with varying degrees of potency, acidity, concentration.

The odds are so heavily weighted in favour of life. And yet. Bed became a laboratory.

* * *

‘There are many different theories about how these caves formed – but we don’t know for sure,’ James says. ‘It is one of those mysteries Nature has chosen to keep to herself. At best we can speculate, based on the evidence that has been left behind.’

There is movement in the Earth’s crust, which causes dykes to form. Then rainwater combines with acidic carbon dioxide from decomposing plant material and flows through the fracture zone. This in turn initiates a complex chemical reaction, resulting in various solutions which finally crystallize and evolve into the various formations we see here.

There had been seismic shifts. The cracks became crevices. Continents drifted away. They had looked at each other from afar.

She had felt herself slipping.

The earth gave way beneath her.

There was nothing to hold her. She fell. If he fell too, she couldn’t tell.

From the outside, she thinks, you would never know they existed. These Gothic cathedrals of moving stone, ‘flow stone,’ hollowed out, shaped like those sandcastles you make with drippy sand with little children. What if they had never been discovered? Would they become their own koan, like the tree falling in the forest which no one sees?

Virginia wants someone to tell this to, to share like a playful slap, but Dave is swallowed into the lens of his new digital toy.

No insect life survives in here. There are no butterflies, no ants, no ladybirds. It’s an insectless world.

‘What a pleasure,’ the woman ahead of her says.

Virginia feels a barb of spite towards her, this cosy woman with her cosy life, and her antipathy for insects. No butterflies? You might as well as well extinguish spring. Blossoms. Rose petals. The stupid cow.

‘There are obviously no cobwebs, that’s because there are no spiders ... all insects need light. And as you’ll see, it gets very dark in here.’

James warns people who are afraid of the dark to close their eyes before he switches the lights off. There is nervous giggling around her. The man who still touches his wife-who-doesn’t-care-for-insects’ bottom now has his arm around her shoulders. The click is dramatic, and echoes in the cavernous spaces. Virginia keeps her eyes open. For several blind moments she cannot see her hand though she holds her palm to her

eyelashes. She feels extinguished in this entombing darkness. She sighs into it. You can almost imagine the world beginning over, so thick and solid is this blackness. A place before light intervened. Strange things happen in caves. She thinks of *A Passage to India*. What really happened in that cave? The point was to finish the book not knowing.

For a moment, she imagines the electricity failing, and them all being trapped in this rock, never to emerge again. It is not quite a wish, but it is a thought. To die in this icy terrestrial womb, stillborn. It would be easy. Heartbreak would soak into the stalactites, sorrow into the stalagmites, flesh and bone would fossilize into the granite of this disturbed earthly cellar that doesn't care for humans and their dirt and the destruction they wreak with their presence. A final resting place, like Romeo and Juliet, mistaken, out of synch, but unshakeable in the bedrock of their love.

Could you call it grief, to mourn the unconceived? It was enough of a personal flaw to fail at conception the natural way, but to fail at IVF too?

'I'm sorry,' the doctor had said.

'It's no-one's fault,' Dave said back.

But he didn't know.

The bed in the surgery had been covered with a plastic sheet. Stirrups on either side. She was told to 'breathe.' She had clutched the nurse's hand as she felt the cold speculum push inside her.

'It isn't mine,' Patrick had said, as if it was a jumper he'd left behind in her apartment.

And in that, he disowned not only what was taking root in the soil of her belly, but the countless tender, funny and joyous histories they had accumulated over the three years they had shared a bed.

She was not ready to be a single mother.

When the lights come back on she tries to catch Dave's eye but he has it firmly attached to the camera lens. Look at me, she hopes. Her thoughts echo off the cold patient walls of this frozen breathing beast. If she speaks it, something might shatter, or perhaps like a blind bat, it will just reverberate, return to her, faithful as echolocation.

Maybe it is possible to save a relationship one vacation at a time – attraction after attraction. Perhaps sites and histories can fill the hollow spaces between people. If you use up enough computer memory, it is possible to fill the cave of emptiness, shore the heartbreak you never even knew you were holding until it was discovered by too many nights in bed, and too little action in the dark of the fallopian mystery.

* * *

By the time they tunnel back from the womb of the rock, she has it formed, word by word, to deflect the stalactites of blame they have been growing towards one another. *Me. It's my fault. I had an abortion when I was twenty-four ... I didn't know... maybe the scar tissue ...*

But before she can say it, two things happen. Dave turns the video camera to her. He films her for a few moments and then something makes him stop. He lifts his eye off the camera and looks at her. Directly. Then he clicks it shut and from deep within the darkness he reaches out for her with his hands. His fingers close around her wrist. Then they reach for her cold fingers, and interlock with hers.

'No butterflies ...' he murmurs. 'I bet you hated that ...'

And it falls from her. The unsaid thing she has been hollowing out inside herself as she remembers the first time Dave took her away on a weekend, the doctor's words still ringing in her ears, 'I'm sorry.' Dave had led her into the cloying humidity of a breeding enclosure where hundreds of butterflies touched her, a winged confetti, warm, flickering, breathing.

The opposite of falling petals.

She brushes her cheek, it is alive with tears. Dave's hand, warm and sure, holds her steady as they emerge from the cave and reach the light.

In the Spirit of McPhineas Lata

Lauri Kubuitsile

This tale begins at the end; McPhineas Lata, the perennial bachelor who made a vocation of troubling married women, is dead. The air above Nokanyana village quivers with grief and rage, and not a small amount of joy because the troubling of married women, by its very definition, involved a lot of trouble. But, maybe because of his slippery personality, or an inordinate amount of blind luck, McPhineas Lata seemed to dodge the bulk of the trouble created by his behaviour, and left it for others to carry on, on his behalf. He had after all, admitted to Bongo and Cliff, his left and right side kicks, that troubling married women was a perfect past-time which was ‘all sweet and no sweat’.

Women in the village of Nokanyana, named after a small river that no one had yet been able to discover, were notoriously greedy, and, without exception, surly. Husbands in the village were all small and thin with tight muscles worked into knots because they spent all of their lives either working to please their wives or withstanding barrages of insults and criticisms for failing to do it up to the very high expectation of Nokanyana women. For Nokanyana men, it was a lose-lose situation and, as a result, each and every one of them despised McPhineas Lata merely for remaining single – he had made the right decision and they had not.

McPhineas Lata, though thus despised by most husbands, was adored by most wives. His funeral was full of dramatic fainting and howls of grief echoing as far as the Ditlhako Hills. Tears fell by the bucketful and nearly succeeded in creating the village’s missing namesake. The husbands stood at the back of the gathering wearing variations on the theme ‘stern face’ while the minister said his last words. When it was

time to pour dirt on the coffin of McPhineas Lata, the husbands rushed past their crying wives and grabbed up the shovels. Some even came prepared with their own to make the work faster. Indeed, no one could remember a burial that had lasted for so short a time. No sooner had the wives heard that first shovelful of soil hit against the wooden coffin, as they were still organizing themselves for their final grand crescendo of wailing, than the soil was seen to be heaped into a great mound over the grave. The men then piled stones on top, of a great number sure to keep McPhineas Lata firmly in his eternal bed. The men stacked the shovels by the grave, slapped the soil off their hands, and led the way back to the village leaving all their McPhineas Lata problems in the cemetery for good. Or so they thought.

As the husbands made their happy ways to Ema Rengwe Bar, MmaTebogo, one of McPhineas's greatest fans, lingered behind looking longingly at McPhineas Lata's grave. She wondered how the women of Nokanyana would manage without such a talented man. She also wondered what the women would do with all of their spare time. There was only so much husband haranguing a woman could stand. She thought about how much she personally would miss McPhineas Lata and without so much as a warning her mind floated away into McPhineas Lata Land.

Naledi Huelela stopped on the thin lane leading from the cemetery to the village and looked back at McPhineas Lata's grave and spotted MmaTebogo. 'What does she think she's doing?' she asked with indignation. The wives stopped and turned to see MmaTebogo lying on top of McPhineas Lata's grave. 'She can't do that!' Naledi said. She felt quite proprietorial over McPhineas Lata since he had died in her bed in the middle of one of his more gymnastically performed sessions. It really had been quite extraordinary what he could get up to. People said he read books.

* * *

'Read books?' Bongo responded with a sceptical air when asked by the husbands who had gathered at Ema Rengwe Bar after the funeral.

Though they had left the cemetery in a jovial and confident mood, a comment by Zero Maranyane put paid to that. He had looked up from

his first beer and said, 'I doubt our wives will forget him as quickly as we will.'

It was a bitter taste of what their McPhineas Lata-less future was going to hold. No, Nokanyana wives would not forget McPhineas Lata. It would have been better if he had lived to a ripe old age where his muscles and frail, old man body would have let the wives down and would have had them drifting back to their hard-done-by husbands. Instead, he died as virile as ever, for god's sake, he died in the act of one of his more acrobatic performances, or so the husbands had heard.

The husbands were in a predicament. They knew enough to realize that a dead and buried McPhineas Lata didn't mean dead and buried McPhineas Lata *memories*. Memories that would likely swirl and twirl in their wives mind, adding salt and strength until McPhineas Lata became an untouchable super-sex hero with whom they could never compare.. They realized then that they had quite a problem with McPhineas Lata dead and buried. Their wives had been almost manageable when he was around, but now the husbands expected the worst.

So they grilled McPhineas Lata's left sidekick, Bongo. 'McPhineas Lata reading books? No, he was far too lazy for that. Mostly, I always put it down to a good imagination,' Bongo offered. 'Imagination?' the husbands asked. If that was the case, they were most certainly doomed.

RraTebogo stood up to address the husbands. He was in the same rudderless boat as they were, but he knew they needed a plan if there was to be any hope at all. 'Men! Men! If McPhineas Lata had imagination, why can't we get some of it? Why not? Just because we never had imagination before, doesn't mean we can't change. To be honest, I don't think we have a chance if we don't.' Then he turned to McPhineas Lata's right hand sidekick, Cliff, 'So did he ever give you any pointers? Any advice?'

Cliff, not the brightest bulb in the box, looked to Bongo for help. 'He did say once that it was good to regulate speed,' Cliff offered up as assistance. The crowd nodded in approval.

Some took out pocket-sized notebooks and wrote down the advice, but before they put a full stop on the sentence, Bongo added, 'But he said speed was also dependent on the woman's likes and dislikes.' The crowd's elation at their perceived progress fell like a lead balloon when they found they were back to the start line.

A particularly gnarled and knotty fellow named Tobias Oitlhobogile stood up. Hunched over, he said in a battered voice, 'Maybe we should work together to come up with McPhineas Lata's method. I don't see any of us finding it out on our own.' The husbands nodded. It was better that way, at least if they failed, which in all likelihood would be the inevitable outcome, together it wouldn't feel so personal. And they could always meet at Ema Rengwe to commiserate; at least that would be something to look forward to.

So while the wives were fighting it out, trying to climb on top of McPhineas Lata's rocky grave to give him a few last humps, the husbands made a plan of how together they would, by the process of elimination, come up with McPhineas Lata's secret for satisfying their wives.

RraTebogo, the headmaster at the local primary school, rushed to collect a blackboard which he and Ntatemogolo Moeng carried back to the bar. They would use it to map out their plan. They knew that there were only so many things that one could do when it came to making love so they divided the work into a few main categories. The husbands had decided to work in a logical, deductive manner. They would start broadly and work down to the intricate details. All evidence collected would be brought back to Ema Rengwe, discussed, and compiled into notes by the elected secretary, Mr Mokwadi Okwadile, the local accountant. They were going to be systematic and with a good effort by everyone, they were almost assured of success.

The women trickled home from the cemetery over the next week, tired and hungry and more surly than usual. A thunderstorm on the weekend meant no woman could buck and ride on the grave as she mourned McPhineas Lata, and the men knew the time had come to begin collecting the information they needed.

RraTebogo was given the broad topic of foreplay. Once Tebogo, their son, was born almost thirty-six years previously, RraTebogo had thought as the natural course of things, foreplay should be abandoned in lieu of sleep. Reintroducing such a long forgotten activity after such a substantial period of time proved to be a bit touch and go. On his first attempt, which even he recognized later as slightly overambitious, MmaTebogo stuck her head under the covers and responded 'What the hell do you think you're doing Old Man?' Lost for words, RraTebogo rolled over and went to sleep.

The next day he decided he'd have to take things a little slower. Before getting down to business, he rubbed her right shoulder for three minutes. The time-span he knew for certain as he made sure the digital alarm clock Tebogo had bought them for Christmas was positioned at the correct angle as to be seen from the bed. Then he stroked her left side four times in sequence and then promptly proceeded with the business. Since MmaTebogo neither shouted nor hit him, he marked it up as a success and passed his news on to the others that night at Ema Rengwe.

Mokwadi looked up from his notebook, his eyes swimming behind his thick, Coke-bottle glasses. 'Was that four minutes on the shoulder and three strokes on the side?'

'No,' RraTebogo corrected. 'Three minutes on the right shoulder and four strokes of the *left* side. Don't forget that left. I might be a bit subjective, but it seemed that the left side is the right side for the stroking. Anyway, we'll know soon enough.'

And indeed they would, for once something was seen to work all of the husbands took the bit of information home and put it into practice in their beds. So for a week of nightly sessions in each and every home in Nokanyana, husbands were giving their wives three-minute rubs of the right shoulder and four strokes of the left side before getting down to the business. The wives were curiously quiet throughout the week. A few hardcores still climbed up the hill to the cemetery to cavort with the memory of McPhineas Lata, but the rest stayed at home, more confused than anything. Something strange was happening in Nokanyana and they didn't want to be up on top of McPhineas Lata's grave and miss the uncovering of all this mysterious activity.

* * *

Back at Ema Rengwe the husbands were in a jubilant mood. Things were going well with the foreplay. 'It is time to move on!' RraTebogo said, bringing out the heavy blackboard from the bar storeroom. 'Okay Ntatemogolo Moeng. You've been assigned breasts, any progress there?'

The husbands' eyes moved to the old man sitting on a stool in the corner. He stood up straight and repositioned his jacket, circa 1972, evidenced by the massive lapels and 4 cm by 4 cm checked pattern, red on tan. 'Thank you, *Modulasetilo*. I am happy to report that I have

nothing at all to report.’ The old man bowed slightly and repositioned himself with no small amount of effort on the tall stool.

‘Well, have you tried anything?’ RraTebogo asked in desperation. ‘Even a negative result is helpful.’ The husbands nodded their heads. They all knew that a hard smack from a big, disagreeable wife would teach them a lesson they wouldn’t soon forget.

Ntatemogolo Moeng stood up again. ‘Thank you *Modulasetilo*. Yes, I have tried a few things but they seem to have just made MmaMoeng very annoyed. She has taken to bringing a softball bat to bed, so considering my age and the fragility of my bones, I thought it best to stop along the way. It was a matter of health.’ He climbed back up on the stool.

RraTebogo was annoyed. ‘Bloody hell man, just tell us what you did so we all avoid it. I don’t think any of us cherish the idea of getting hit in the head with a bat!’

‘Thank you, Modulasetilo. I can say that it appears squeezing of breasts is a bit tricky – considering all of the patterns and rhythms and varying levels of pressure – I really didn’t know where to start. And then, I know some of you more ambitious young men might even add in some mouth activity. I just didn’t know where to start, honestly, so I thought since the two milk cows in my kraal seemed to accept the pattern I used on them, I started there. Sort of a milking action. But as I said, MmaMoeng didn’t take kindly to that.’ As he climbed back up on the high stool, the husbands let out a collective groan and shook their heads.

RraTebogo tried to be respectful of the old man’s age. ‘Are you saying you were milking your wife?’

Ntatemogolo stood up. ‘Yes, Modulasetilo, that is exactly what I am saying, but be warned, I wouldn’t advise it.’ He sat back down.

RraTebogo looked at Mokwaledi. ‘Did you write that down? We certainly don’t want to go that route again.’ He turned to the husbands. ‘Does anybody have anything to report? Anything at all?’ He couldn’t help but sound discouraged. He knew a few shoulder squeezes and side strokes were not going to push the legend of McPhineas Lata out of the wives’ minds. ‘I have noticed a few of our wives have taken to drifting back to the grave in the late afternoon. We husbands are losing ground!’

RraTebogo looked around and saw nothing but a crowd of disappointed faces. ‘Come on men, we need to put in more effort.’ Then

hesitantly, the secretary raised his hand. 'Yes, Mokwadi, do you have something for us?'

'I'm not quite sure. As you know, I was given speed as my area, but I discovered something that has nothing to do with that. I don't know if it is in order to mention it or not.'

'Give it over Man! Can't you see we're desperate here?'

'Well, I was experimenting with quite a fast speed and MmaMokwadi shifted to get a better view of the TV and I slipped off her and fell to the side. I happened to settle right next to her and since I was slightly out of breath, being not used to such high-energy activity, I was breathing hard right in her ear. Suddenly she picked up the remote and shut off the TV. As the week progressed, I added a few flicks of my tongue and kisses on her neck and I believe I'm on to something.'

The Nokanyana husbands burst into cheers. Some rushed forward and slapped the shy accountant on the back.

RraTebogo stood up to get some order. 'Okay, okay. This is only going to work if we can reproduce the moves in our own homes. Mokwadi, show us on the blackboard.' The slight man stood up and took the chalk. He quickly drew a diagram complete with arrows and times as to how the husbands should approach this new move. The house agreed it should be inserted in the routine after the shoulder rubbing and the side-stroking, and before the business. That night the Nokanyana husbands went home a happy lot. They began to believe that they actually could replicate McPhineas Lata's moves and that their wives would forget all about that dead wife-troubler.

* * *

MmaTebogo was at the communal tap filling her water tank when Sylvia Okwadile pushed up with her wheelbarrow loaded with two large buckets. They greeted each other and sat quietly together; Sylvia on the edge of the wheelbarrow, MmaTebogo on a turned up cement block, both nibbling at the words they wanted to say while watching the thin stream of water fall from tap to tank. 'Too bad about McPhineas Lata,' MmaTebogo started, hoping that Sylvia would pick it up and lead them to the topic filling both of their minds.

Sylvia adjusted the purple and red doek on her head, and then glanced at MmaTebogo from the corner of her eye. 'Everything fine there at home?' she asked.

'Yes,' MmaTebogo answered. 'Why do you ask?'

'Nothing unusual?' Sylvia wanted a bit more before she let her tongue wag freely.

'Well, now that you mention it.' And MmaTebogo began explaining the changes taking place in her matrimonial bed.

Sylvia listened, but like most people, she listened through ears that filtered things to be skewed in a general direction already decided by her. When MmaTebogo finished she asked, 'So is it three minutes on the right shoulder and four strokes on the left side?'

MmaTebogo's eyes widened. 'Yes! Yes! That is exactly it! Every night like clockwork. Then there are a few minutes of blowing in my ear, five to seven kisses on the neck, and then the business.'

'Aha! I knew it!' Sylvia said, jumping to her feet. She now had enough evidence to confirm what she already believed. She told MmaTebogo her theory. 'He's here ... with us. I knew he couldn't just leave like that. McPhineas Lata has taken up the bodies of our husbands. He has taken spiritual possession of the husbands of Nokanyana.'

MmaTebogo, a practical woman, said, 'Do you think so? Can that even happen?'

'Sure, why not? What else could it be?'

MmaTebogo had to agree she had no answer to that question. Maybe Sylvia was right. The two decided to call the wives to see if in their bedrooms they were experiencing the same transformation.

'It starts with three minutes on the left shoulder,' Karabo John said the next morning, at the meeting at the church at the end of the village.

'Left? Now that's an interesting twist,' MmaTebogo commented. 'Why would McPhineas Lata change things for only one of the wives?' The wives nodded their heads in agreement. It was indeed unusual. Maybe the theory was not correct after all.

But then Karabo John remembered, 'Okay, no ... you know Dimpho has a problem, he never could keep left and right straight.' The wives giggled. That was the answer then. It was true, they decided, McPhineas Lata had not left them when he died, he had only taken up residence in each of their husbands' bodies. They were so relieved. Many

had wondered how they would go on without their weekly visits with McPhineas Lata and the grave humping was just not cutting it.

‘Now it’s even better,’ Naledi Huelela added. ‘Now we all get McPhineas Lata – *every night*. No more sharing!’

‘He really is a wise man,’ MmaTebogo said, nodding thoughtfully.

* * *

As the sun set in Nokanyana, husbands and wives had big, wide smiles planted firmly on their faces and deep in their hearts. Once darkness descended, they hurried off to the bedrooms, leaving children to fend for themselves; favourite television dramas were abandoned in this rush, as husbands and wives could hardly wait to discover what new between-the-sheets tricks and treats McPhineas Lata had in store for them.

Desire, with Borders

Arja Salafranca

It was a type of desire.

It was a desire without love, a desire with borders.

If you shut your eyes it could be any man, no names, just a man, fulfilling what a man is supposed to do. It was a hot February night in Johannesburg and the windows couldn't be opened wide or the cat would get out. She didn't want the cat to get out, her female tabby was a shy frightened thing, easily terrorised by the Toms in the neighbourhood.

And instead of a man with no name, he had a name. An ex-boyfriend, an ex-boyfriend who was now in the process of becoming involved with another woman, yet here they were, naked on her bed, hot, but still close enough for him to roll on top of her, to kiss her, to awaken something.

It had been years since they had parted, years in which they had remained friends. The spark of sexuality had long died, but here they were. If she closed her eyes, he could be anyone she desired; or wanted to make a life with. But instead she closed her eyes, accepting it; this newly sprung desire. He was not someone else, he was himself, and she didn't care. Accepting it, holding him.

Now that he was finally on the cusp of moving away from her, involved with another, she clung to him. Holding him. She didn't want him anymore, but she didn't want to let him go. It wasn't even fair to him, and as she held him and was moved by him, she wondered guiltily if what she was doing was wrong. Was she giving him false hope? Destroying his chances of a new life without her, even as she was no longer prepared to love him?

In the end, they stopped. They had no condoms; she was not on the pill anymore. The desire ebbed away as quickly as it had come.

'I'll bring condoms next time,' he said.

She nodded then, but days later, she knew that even if he brought condoms next time, there would be no going back. She'd release him to this other woman; perhaps it would free her too.

* * *

The writer stops tapping at her keyboard. It's not going right. She has a commission to write an erotic short story for an anthology of local women writers, and she's having problems trying to think of an idea, a story that will go beyond sex.

Truth is it's been a while since she has been able to write any kind of story, erotic or not. It's filled her with a quiet raging despair. She's meant to be a writer and hasn't produced anything that has met with enthusiasm, from herself or others in what, how long? Who knows. Rather not count or think about it. The man, the ex, said you go through waves, periods when you're creative and productive, and other times you must just wait, lie fallow, live, laugh, love, do whatever it is you need to replenish the well.

She wonders idly if she would ever be invited into the lives of her characters. What if she met them, a list of the characters she's created, drinking cappuccinos in a coffee shop, all together. What if they were friends? Of course they wouldn't invite her.

The people she creates are not friends. She doubts she would like to get to know them: a lesbian who kills her lover in one short story, a gay man who is too afraid to live in another, a couple in their 60s, soul mates all life long, and yet the one married to another woman, and they carry on having their clandestine affair. Or the fat women described in one story, eating her way into unhappiness, growing bigger, her face blown out of proportion by the extra weight. No, these are not friends, although it is fun to peer into their world, to muse on the possibility of creating friends, the way you create characters.

They are born, seemingly without your intervention, they live on a page, and you go along with these creations, as oblivious as to the why or how. You're not really an omniscient God: you are not six years old, playing with Barbie, stuffing cloth in front of her stomach to make her pregnant, in total control of her and Ken.

Still, it's there, this anticipation, this idea that you could look in and see them: there, together, perhaps turning to welcome you. Join us,

they say, join us, you know something about each one of us, now let us tell you what you don't know, what you haven't written about ...

She did write an erotic story once, at twenty-one. Still a virgin, but she couldn't refuse the commission. So she bought books, collections of erotic fiction, and using what she knew (because she had been groped by now in cars and nightclubs), and mixing it with fantasy, she wrote a story. It had been published, then republished in another collection. She went at it, making sex a reality before she'd had a chance to do so in her own life.

So why now does the writer fling down her pen, or stop tapping, whatever image is most evocative? Why does the thought of describing penises, and the heat of sex, and fingers feeling seem so distasteful? Once she was told her stories were too sexy, too full of it to be published in a collection, and now she cannot think of describing all the bodily acts without wanting to run screaming.

'Sex is private, it's between two people only,' she says prudishly to anyone willing to listen. But sex isn't private: it's on billboards, on magazine covers; it's in most movies. It's a fact of life. It is anything but private: the suggestion is all around.

And yet somehow she has kept away from all this. She started dating after she left the ex-boyfriend, but the effort seemed intolerable. A colleague at work started dating too, after a divorce, and soon after they sat together saying how tired they were. 'I couldn't be bothered,' said the woman, 'instead of meeting another man for another drink in another bar I'd rather just be home, in bed, reading a book.' The woman had divorced at twenty-eight. She was now thirty-four she desperately wanted to meet someone, and yet, as curiously, she didn't. Had they both left it too late? Must you meet someone in your twenties and then gradually grow old together, retiring happily from the singles scene? But what do you do if you haven't met anyone, and forty stares at you in the face?

But the effort's such a strain, the primping and preening. She did meet a man she liked once, but he was unscrupulously seeing another woman while courting her.

She feels like she has never known the rules of the dating game.

So there is February. She could return to February with her ex – the first time in three years that she has felt desire, that she has thought that she might be able to have sex again. She could mine February: she

could make it even more sexy. Start with the hot night. Take out the bit about the cat: open the windows and let the breeze blow in, the curtains billow.

Change a few details. The man is tall, dark and handsome, actually, he's remarkably like the motivational speaker she met months ago. Dusky, the shoulders broad from regular gym sessions, the muscles rippling beneath the cut-off white T-shirt, the face strong and chiselled. The brow is slightly furrowed at thirty-seven, but that adds to the charm.

And she too can change: she's tall and willowy with narrow shoulders, black sleek hair. Her face too is chiselled, in a feminine way, not sharp or angular, but defined, pretty and defined.

And then they do things to each other in a bedroom, the exes. They forget about the intervening years, perhaps they even re-discover each other. But now it's starting to sound like a Mills and Boon romance.

No, instead she will add stretch marks, and early greying hair; she will add pimples, a balding spot, normally shaped bodies rather than the Hollywood ideal. She'll write about closing her eyes and surrendering, yes surrendering, because that's what it is. It's surrender to the physical: the body's in control, more so than it is ever is. You want it now, you want it more than you've ever wanted it before and you're even prepared to forget about using a condom.

'Pull out at the right time,' you say, but he, sensibly, refuses. He's right, so right, and he's had sex in the time you have been apart. It's only right he use a condom.

* * *

That other woman. She is there.

'Do you think we should be doing this? What would Brenda think?' you ask him.

'I don't know.'

'You'd better not tell her.'

'No I won't.'

He's cheating on a woman he doesn't know very well, but he has been to bed with her, and he wonders if he'll have a real relationship with her.

‘I don’t know what to feel,’ he says. ‘I don’t know if I am cheating on her or on you!’

He makes her come, gasping out in that old familiar way, reawakening what has lain dormant so longer. He makes her feel sexy.

‘You are still desirable,’ he says to her, now in her mid-thirties, a long way from the years they first met. Then he was in his mid-thirties and she was only edging towards the threshold of the thirties. For once, she feels good naked as she lies there, her breasts just visible in the darkness, the shapes of them, lying back in her bed, the streetlamps illuminating the curve of them, the house in darkness, and the heat lessening up, just. The breeze is there, but only just. The curtains do not billow, they do not move, the air is too oppressive.

* * *

She could write about the men she has known since she was twenty-one, a virgin writing about things she knew nothing about. She could write about the Canadian man and the fiancée he had spilt with a year before and how tied he was to the memory of her. Or she could write about the man who was a virgin at twenty-eight when she met him, the man she subsequently deflowered.

She could write about encounters and gropes, and nowhere dates, a failed attempt at one-night stands. She could write about the intervening years, but she suspects the answers aren’t there either. It seems too exhausting now to exhume the past, dissect this man, separate this face from that. It’s life that happens in between, from the men who define you when you’re with them, to the failed dreams.

* * *

Walking into a restaurant, it happens. She sees them there. In a corner are the older lovers: Cleo and Nic. Cleo’s just on the cusp of grey hair, the strands blending into her natural blonde. Cleo leans forward in her seat, smiling, wiping some sugar off the surface of the table. Nic enjoys being catered to, as it were; letting Cleo stir sugar in his coffee. This couple have been together over forty years, yet have never lived together as husband and wife. He won’t leave his Greek wife; and long ago, they decided not to marry, not to go against their parents’ wishes.

How do you reconcile a Jew marrying a man of the Greek Orthodox faith? They see each other in out of the way coffee bars, sleeping together, occasionally now. The bond will never be broken, and there they are: made flesh. The tall, red-haired woman and the overweight man with grey hair. Should she go up to them and say, 'I imagined you, created you out of a story someone told me once. I've written about you, about the night you decided to separate, all those years ago, I've written about other episodes in your life. I feel like I know you, vaguely.'

They'd laugh, look wary, do whatever you do when a madwoman comes up to you, saying impossible stupid things. They'd edge away, be non-committal. Perhaps the man would call the manager or security. Looking at this intrusive woman as though she were wearing old rags, a bag lady, instead of a flowing crushed velvet plum skirt, still wearing the clothes from last night, hastily flung back on this morning.

In another corner, Jude and Dale, up too early this Sunday morning. They were out the whole of last night, at a club. Now they're here, drinking espressos to jolt them into the day, sharing a croissant – students never have enough money. Silently they eat and drink, both hung-over, with panda eyes as testimony to the night before.

Tyra in love with Tim, Tim in love with Chloe once. Tyra who manipulated her way into Chloe's life. Tyra, who switched sexuality fluidly, yet was mad in the end. What happened to Tim? Did he emigrate, move cities, marry someone else? Did he ever hear what Tyra did, how she seduced Chloe to get to Tim, and then what she did afterwards? Did he want to know, was he beyond caring at that point?

And the man, the man with the dog, walking in the park. About to emigrate. He is there too, sitting just outside the door on the pavement, because the dog is with him, and she's not allowed inside the restaurant. He too drinks a cappuccino. Before him there's a large breakfast, omelette, sausages, rolls. But he's pecking away at the meal, he looks unhappy, disturbed ... Does that mean he didn't go in the end? Did he stay while Deborah and the kids left? Or has she got the time frame wrong? Perhaps this is before he takes a dog for a walk, the main event of the story?

She can't tell, sighs, sits down, and orders her own morning coffee. She can't touch these people, characters of her own imagining, yet real, real as she sits reading a newspaper at her morning coffee. What do they say about her? The failed relationships, the relationships doomed

by obsession and lust, by damaged psyches. People who cannot love, no matter how much they may want to. People who never love, until one day, a door is flung wide open, but by then it's too late. Are they all fragments of her: these wounded people looking for hope between the sheets? And on the pages.

* * *

A year later. Another night, and he's there again. She invites him to watch preview copies of Yiddish films from the 1920s and 30s. They see the Madonna of that era, a woman called Molly Picon, looking into a lost world, hearing a language lost now. All she knows of the language is a few fragments, words passed down in conversation: meshugenah, mensch, faribels, putz, and here they come alive again, part of sentences, phrases, another world and culture.

He's broken up with Brenda, and the guilt cuts into them both. He still talks about her, regretting that it happened. He saw her once on an aeroplane coming up from Cape Town. He said hello, she was friendly enough toward him, but she was involved, pointed to the man next to her. He thinks they could have been something. But, he too is running away from love. He doubted her, couldn't fit the pieces of her life's jigsaw together. Where did she get the money to live in a beautiful hill-top flat when she only worked occasionally? Why did she keep flying around down to Cape Town? He never knew. He ended it abruptly.

Had he simply been too suspicious, too scared of love, so scared he made excuses come out as reasons?

* * *

And was she too, to blame, the writer? She feels sometimes that she misled him, offering him something briefly, and then taking it away again. Her own need to be loved again, to feel desire, to know lust again. She worries guiltily that he took her sudden interest after so many years as desire again, a rekindling.

He wonders now, saying, 'Do you think we'll ever get back together? We've been apart four years, and yet, neither one of us have met anyone else to be serious about, and people keep seeing us together at movies and whatever, and they think we're still together!'

She shrugs, 'So what. Confuse them. Who cares?'

She wants to offer it to him again, sex as a sort of present. There's a certain spark in the air, certain boundaries shift and dissolve from time to time, before they harden again. She tries to lead him to her bed, but he won't have it.

'I feel uncomfortable,' he says. 'We shouldn't be doing this, not unless we're going to mean it ...' He hesitates, wants to, yet doesn't want to.

She shrugs again.

Instead they watch old black and white Yiddish movies of another time, another world.

* * *

She wakes up suddenly. It's six in the morning and she has been dreaming about hugging a man. Just hugging, hugging broad shoulders, a man whispering love things to her. She even manages to masturbate. She cannot bring herself to climax, she can, just about, bring herself to the brink, but that's all. Something has broken through, though, this morning after what isn't really a morning after. What remains is a memory of it, of what it can be, this exchange, this thing called sex.

She goes back to the study. It's still early and the light is pale, blue dawn. The cat wakes too and settles again on her blanket on the table. The writer takes up the metaphoric pen and starts again. As the blue light becomes gold, the characters take shape again; once more they assume life. They have sex, procreate, one even has a baby. There's something new stirring, some prescient summoning of the future, as there always has been when she puts thoughts and people to paper.

Stains Like a Map

Jayne Bauling

We bought our bed in Maputo just before we were married. I suppose it was really a mattress, but it was all we would have to sleep on, so we called it our bed. I was glad it was still safely sealed into its plastic bag for the long and dusty bus ride back to our village. I wanted it to be perfect the first time we shared it.

We're not tall people, so our bed was long enough, but we had to lie like one person, holding each other tight and hard unless we wanted to roll off onto the floor. It wouldn't have mattered if we had. Our bed was only a few centimetres high, a strip of yellow foam rubber, but the holding on was fun if we weren't fighting. If we were, Ido would sit outside and I would find our bed suddenly too wide.

That was in the beginning, when the bed was new. The foam was pale yellow, fresh and firm and unmarked, like a page waiting for writing. The first stains were ours, our mouths and fingers added to the damage. You know how it goes. We were practising for making Niando. The yellow began to darken, in the way of foam rubber, I don't know why that happens. Us-shaped dents and hollows appeared. Mostly I liked them. Just occasionally I missed being one instead of two, me instead of we. Often, during the holding on, I would pretend to myself that our bed was a small boat in which we were drifting on a terrible sea, and if one of us fell off we would pull the other down too, among the strangling seaweed or into the jagged mouths of sharks.

Sometimes I felt that was our real situation anyway.

About four months before Niando was born, I started picking fights with Ido to get the bed to myself. I could hardly believe the way my belly was swelling. My size made sharing hot and uncomfortable. I think Ido might have been glad not to share too.

When Niando was born, just before we came to South Africa, he arrived so suddenly that only Ido's mother was there to help me, and so our bed soaked in more stains. When Ido got the message to come home and he saw his son, he couldn't speak for an hour. He smiled a lot though.

When I washed our bed, it looked fresh and new again, but after a few weeks faint outlines started to show, like the ghosts of stains.

The first time we tried to come to South Africa, the truck never arrived at the meeting place. A man who called himself an agent had made us pay in advance, so trudging back to the village with all our belongings and Niando crying all the way, I should have been as angry and upset as Ido. I'm not sure why I wasn't. My feelings about going to South Africa weren't as positive as his, but they weren't exactly bad feelings either.

After that, every arrangement we made fell through. Things kept going wrong. Once we set off and the car we'd paid for broke down. Next there was another truck, but three days before we were supposed to leave the floods started and the roads were washed away. I started believing we weren't meant to leave Mozambique, but Ido and some of the other men from the village were determined to go. After three months of trying, they decided we should walk.

Ido tied up our mattress in a roll that bounced against his back. Sometimes, for a change, he would take Niando and I would have the bed for a while. It wasn't heavy, but I'd get so hot with it bumping behind me, I'd start imagining I was melting and that soon the only thing left would be a small puddle of me.

First we walked north a bit, so that we could cross the big river while we were still in Mozambique, openly using one of the bridges. We were all worried that the man who called himself a guide wouldn't be at the meeting place we'd arranged, and that it would be more money lost, but he was there waiting for us in the smoke-coloured evening. Just for a moment I was disappointed, but I didn't let it show. I felt angry with myself, as if I was being disloyal to Ido.

The guide didn't come all the way with us, just far enough to show us the opening in the fence. Even in the dying light I could see the path beaten through the long grass by others who had come that way. It made me wonder just how many had gone through before us, and if they had found work and shelter. Would there be something left for us?

We were mostly too frightened to sleep once we entered The Park. Only the babies slept, worried to constant waking by mosquitoes. The rest of us would sit close around our fire when we felt it was safe to light one. We would listen to the night, wondering which sounds came from predators, which from prey. There is a sobbing sound you hear in the bush at night that Ido said came from some night bird, but there is laughter too, somehow lonelier than the sobbing; there is a long-drawn-out whistling and a shrill screaming, all woven about and between the roaring and barking. Sometimes you think there is silence, but it is full of small sounds, sighs and rustlings and slitherings and squeaks.

In was in the hottest part of our third day walking that I heard a sharp little sound behind me, like a gasp of pain. When I turned I saw that Nelita had stopped. Her pregnancy slowed her down and she and her husband always fell behind.

‘The baby!’ She stared at me out of frightened eyes. ‘It’s coming.’

‘It’s too soon.’ Her husband Pekiwa sounded angry, not wanting to believe it.

‘Are you sure?’ Valente asked.

The men all started shouting that she must be mistaken and that she couldn’t have a baby out here. I gave them one of my looks.

‘Babies come when they come, not when men say they should. Remember how Niando didn’t wait for you to be there?’ I said to Ido, already handing Niando over so that I could help Nelita.

She and her husband were travelling with only a sleeping bag, so I unrolled our foam mattress, trying to escape the noon heat in the patchy shade of a clump of thorn trees. We had no water left so Pekiwa went to look for some. We were worried about the smell of blood, and at first Nelita was brave the way she bit back her screams when the contractions got bad, but when Pekiwa didn’t come and didn’t come, she seemed to stop caring about anything. The baby was a feeble thing, its legs and arms like little sticks, and too weak to take my milk when Nelita turned away from our attempts to put it to her breast.

Did she blame the child for the hours passing empty of Pekiwa’s return?

‘She won’t feed,’ I fretted to Ido. I had I tried again after Niando had drunk his fill and was quiet, only stirring to scratch at mosquito bites in his sleep.

‘It could be that she senses you aren’t her mother,’ he suggested.

'It's not that. It's because she came so early. She can't suck.'

'If Pekiwa doesn't come back ...' Ido didn't say any more.

'How long should we wait for him?' Valente came over to sit with us, a little away from the small fire we had made.

'I don't think Nelita will be fit to go on in the morning,' I said. 'We'll have to wait anyway.'

She still wouldn't look at her baby, so I kept it with me. No one slept, so I don't know how we didn't hear her go, pushing aside the sleeping bag that had covered her and somehow finding the strength to drag herself away. In the creeping grey of emerging day, we saw that all she had left us of herself was her blood and the smell of her sweat on our foam bed.

And her daughter. Now there was an extra child to carry with us, but she was too little weight to be a physical burden. At every stop I would try to suckle her. She did eventually take some milk, but still she died in the red sunset, with only a small groaning sound. Ido and Valente scraped out a hole for her. I still wonder if the small rocks we used to cover her were enough, or if hyenas or jackals would have come for her later, when we had moved on.

The men were sweating and turned away quickly, but one of the other women and I stood for a minute. We didn't know what name Nelita and Pekiwa might have chosen for their daughter, so we just said a blessing.

Rolling up our bed in the morning, I felt a heaviness in myself. The discoloured foam was beginning to break in places, and a scattering of yellow crumbs looked like maize meal dusting the red-brown ground when I lifted the bed to give it to Ido.

We had to unroll it again a few hours later when the hippo got Valente while he was fetching water. For his comfort only. We couldn't save him, only listen and try to soothe his delirium.

The shape of the stain his blood left on our mattress made me think of a big palm leaf, ragged at the edges.

A kindness: the Kruger National Park is narrow, soon crossed.

The local people seemed friendly, giving us directions, when we got to the lowveld kasi where Celano lived.

'I'd given you up!' he roared in his big voice when he saw us. 'Busi, they are here! I tell you, I feared for you after you sent word and then you didn't come – how long has it taken you?'

Ido and I looked at each other.

‘What day is this?’ Ido asked and I understood that he too had lost count of the days during our walk.

Celano looked from Ido’s face to mine. ‘Too long, I can see. It went badly? But you are here now, that is the thing. And with your little one, look at him! Come, come inside.’

He helped us find materials to add on to his shack. One of the first things I did was wash our mattress. It was the same thing as before. After a while I could see only the faint outlines of stains. It felt fresh and clean, though. Almost new, to go with our new start.

We found piece-work. With a small audience of geckos, we would lie and talk about the future, but also of home.

‘Home isn’t so far. Just next door,’ I reminded Ido.

‘This is home,’ he said.

It was a small difference, but I felt it like an empty space between us.

There was no empty space in our bed. We bought two pillows and a thin quilted cover from the man who sold factory rejects at the bus depot. The cover had a leopard print. Part of me hankered after a deep orange one with lots of ruching and beadwork embroidery, but Ido said it wasn’t practical, especially with a child in the room.

Walking back to Celano’s, Ido carried the pillows and I had the cover, with Niando on my back. As we walked, Ido grew quieter, and I wondered what was wrong, but I didn’t pay too much attention because Niando was hot and complaining.

‘People don’t seem so friendly any more,’ Ido said when we were sitting outside with Celano and Busi that night. ‘When we came home with the new things, there were – I don’t know, there were some looks. As if people thought they hadn’t seen us before and we had come to the wrong place.’

‘It’s because they see that you can buy stuff,’ Busi said. ‘They are jealous.’

Ido was frowning, but by the time we went to bed his usual optimism was back. I was glad. I was excited about sleeping under our new cover.

With Niando cocooned beside our bed in his nest of fleece blankets, we lay awake whispering some more about the future. Ido was

ambitious, and I thought that was a good thing. He believed we should go to Nelspruit, or even Jozi.

‘Are we big enough for such places?’ I asked.

‘We crossed The Park,’ he said. ‘What can frighten us now?’

‘Sometimes I’m more terrified of people than of wild animals.’

‘We’ll watch out for each other.’ He was so confident. ‘Celano has contacts. He’s going to find out about work for us. With full-time work we might be able to live somewhere with four real walls. We’ll buy a proper bed.’

‘Busi says something fell out of their marriage when they bought a big bed. Sometimes they can’t find each other in the night.’

Ido laughed. I could feel his chest vibrating against my milk-full breasts.

‘We’ll buy a very small bed.’

I wasn’t sure how I felt about parting from our strip of foam with its ghost-stains.

I said, ‘There will be more competition in the big places.’

‘More opportunities.’

That was the difference between us. When we were trying to come to South Africa, all those setbacks had made me think it wasn’t meant to be, but Ido had been determined, and here we were.

It was a good night, even with Niando waking twice. Our new cover felt just right, light and not too warm but somehow sheltering. I thought Niando was probably too hot in his fleecy nest, so eventually I took him in with us, but in the morning I could see it was something more.

‘What’s that thing? Prickly heat?’ That was Ido’s first idea.

‘I’m not sure. Ido, remember how we joked that he was growing out of being just a baby because he’s not so round and fat any more? Maybe something else is making him thin?’

‘The walk,’ Ido spoke very fast. ‘It was hard. It took the goodness out of your milk.’

But I knew it wasn’t that. I was scared. Inside myself, I knew it was malaria, but I couldn’t make myself say it out loud. Ido didn’t want to admit it either. When Celano suggested it, he grew angry.

‘It’s tick-bite fever,’ he insisted because that’s what the nurse at the clinic had said after first thinking it was flu.

‘Then why isn’t the medicine working?’

We borrowed money for the bus from Celano and took Niando to the big hospital in Nelspruit. The Outpatients was the busiest place I've ever been in, with so many sick and injured people all trying to get someone's attention or needing help filling in forms and nobody sure where they were supposed to go. I don't know how many hours we waited for someone to help us, and then it was hard to understand what the people were saying.

Niando was too sick to cry when they gave him an injection. The tears were mine.

When we took him home I laid him on our bed. First I wetted his lips and then I gave him a dose of the medicine from the hospital. I saw how the smooth baby fat was beginning to melt from his cheeks, and thought bitterly of the pride I'd felt, taking it as a sign that he was growing from a baby into a little boy. His eyes stared out of his face, huge and too bright with fever.

He couldn't tolerate the cover or his blankets, fighting them with rigid arms and legs, so we let him lie there on the yellow foam.

I stared at the faint persistent outlines of stains marking it. They weren't all from life's big dramas and the fluids that leak from us at birth and death and loving. I knelt beside my child trying to identify those stains, building a wall against an emptiness I felt I must surely bring about merely by contemplating.

I'm not sure how long I knelt reading stains like a map of our lives together. Hours, yes. But a day and a night, or more? Sometimes Ido came and sat with me, or Celano would look in and go away, sombre and heavy-footed. Twice Busi brought food and drink, but I couldn't swallow, or swallowed too fast, feeling it a betrayal of our son to be eating with him the way he was.

He made the same small groaning sound as the baby that died in The Park.

I picked him up and showed him to Ido. He didn't say anything, only turned and stood with his head bent for a while. Then he walked out of the shelter. I could hear someone wailing. It was me.

After a while, Ido came back with Celano and Busi. They took Niando out of my arms and I fell face forward onto our bed, howling like some animal. I bit and tore at the foam with my teeth, and gouged at it with my fingers curled like claws.

Later I rolled onto my back and saw that even though night had come there were no geckos on the cement wall. It was our only cement wall – the windowless end of Celano's two-room shack. I often thought the pink geckos looked made of plastic, pop-eyed as they watched us through the mosquito nights, malaria nights. We would wonder to each other why they rejected the corrugated plastic and tin sides of our shelter.

After the funeral I sat trying to push pieces of foam back into the holes from which I had dug them. I noticed that there were several widening cracks in the foam, the sort of fissures you see in the ground when it is hard and dry.

I did not want to cover the foam. I did not want to turn it over, the way I usually did quite regularly. I believed I could see the imprint of Niando in the foam. How could I turn it to the dirt floor?

That night I realised how over time our weight had flattened and thinned the foam rubber. I could feel every small unevenness in the floor, but that wasn't why I couldn't sleep.

Ido stopped talking, but he held on tighter than ever before when we lay in our bed, only letting go to slap at the silent biting mosquitoes, while I worried about the buzzing ones getting in our ears.

'What about this xeno-madness thing that is happening in Gauteng?' Celano said one evening, more seriously than he spoke when he was just trying to get us to be interested in things again. 'It started in Alexandra, but it's spreading they say ...'

I couldn't make myself care, and it seemed Ido didn't want to hear, but Celano began keeping his radio on all day and half the night. We heard him telling Busi how lucky it was that we were all still here in this small lowveld kasi and not gone to Gauteng.

'We have become makwerekwere,' he said, though Busi was half-South African.

Eventually Ido paid attention. 'I don't understand it,' he said to me when we were getting ready to go to bed one night. 'When we arrived all the South Africans we met talked about being able to imagine they were us. Remember that woman who said *we are you, you are us*?'

He didn't hear the answer I started to make. As if talking about it brought it to us, an explosion of loud, confused noise swallowed the normal night sounds of many people living close together. We heard screaming and angry shouting, people running and a crackling sound

we knew was fire when we saw the night outside come alive with leaping orange light.

Who decided where and how?

It seemed so random.

I couldn't grasp it. Young men came beating and burning. Even some Swazis were attacked although parts of Mpumalanga share their language. They tried to burn our things. The cover from our bed was ablaze, and beginning to blacken and melt. The bed itself simply seemed to shrink, browning at the edges. Then Ido started stamping out the burn. Blood was dripping from his nose and his hands were raw from fighting them off, young men little more than children, who had come at me.

Ido was shouting at me to take what I could and run – run and hide. Thunder boomed in my head, heavier and slower than the hammering in my chest as I ran, crouched over because now the stones were coming, thrown by more people come to join the first young men.

Terror was everywhere. People became urgent, inhuman shapes, capering or fleeing in the glare from the fires, but the shadows looked like waiting traps, too close to the flames and the leaping, chanting mob.

I was sure I would never see Ido again. After the fires were put out and the sounds of conflict had subsided, some of us who had hidden began to find each other, guided by sounds of sobbing or moans and cries of pain. Together, a group of us walked to the kasi police station to ask for shelter.

That was where Ido found us in the morning. He had our bed with him, stinking of burn and smoke. Smelling too of us, as if the heat of its burning had brought out all the old human smells. For a short time I felt ashamed. Then I thought – why must I be? Like the stains, those smells told not just of Ido and me and Niando, but of those who had walked into South Africa with us. I should be proud.

We were placed in a camp. Celano too and even Busi, because she hid her documents and said she was a foreigner so as not to be separated from Celano. For the first few days no one said or did anything. We were too stunned. We just sat and waited, wherever we were told to go. I felt sick most of the time, but that was all I felt.

The faint burnt smell of our mattress made the nausea even worse, but it was difficult enough to keep ourselves and our clothes clean in that

crowded camp where we had to stand in long lines for everything, even water. Washing our bedding was impossible. I tried, rubbing over it with a wet cloth, but I only made it worse.

'Are you sure it's the bed making you sick?' Busi asked me one morning when I was worse than usual, and there was that thing in her voice and her look that forced me to think.

'There's another baby coming,' I told Ido that night, filled with rage against him.

I saw something come back that had been gone from his face since Niando died.

'You say that as if I have done something bad to you,' he said.

'That's how I feel. As if you have purposely made me pregnant to replace Niando.'

'I admit I will be glad of another child –'

'It feels disloyal. And to be waiting for a baby here in this place.' I looked around. 'This is no place to start life.'

We were traitors. Anger and guilt kept me moody all through the pregnancy.

There was talk of returning to Mozambique. Some couldn't wait to go, but Ido and Celano refused to give up their South African dream.

'When things calm down outside,' they said. 'Then we'll find a way to leave.'

The new boy was born in the afternoon. He came out in a rush, just like Niando. This time Ido was with me, but Busi was more help to me and even saved our bed from too many new stains.

Then, with the foam uncomfortably bunching up behind me in the place between my back and buttocks as I raised myself, I felt the new boy's hot mouth groping for my breast, and I stopped being angry.

'Let's call him Niando,' Ido said.

'No!'

Niando was gone. I spoke so loudly and firmly that he didn't argue with me.

'Then should we call him Celano? For all he has done for us since we came out of Mozambique. He is a good friend.'

I agreed, but in my secret mind I continued to think of him as the new boy, a loud baby with funny ways, making us laugh. That was good. Ido no longer went hours without speaking. In our bed at night we whispered about the future again, uncertain though it seemed.

Soon after the birth Celano and Busi disappeared from the camp, and I knew that Ido hoped to follow soon,

I wasn't so sure. I told myself I had to stop being so negative and pessimistic. I needed to be strong and unafraid, for Ido and me, but especially for the new boy who was bringing us both back to life. I wanted so many things for him, and this country could give them to him if we worked hard – and if we were lucky, because I've always seen that hard work alone is never enough.

So we planned in the night, and made arrangements by day, and one morning we slipped away with our child, our bed and the few other things Ido had saved when we were attacked. We came into South Africa taking turns to carry the bed on our backs, but now we pushed it in a Pick n Pay trolley. Ido made a joke about being upwardly mobile.

Last night we laid our fire-shrunken bed on the floor in the home of one of Busi's cousins. This morning, ready to resume our journey, I carried it outside. As I bundled it up to fit into the trolley, it broke in half. I looked at it and my eyes were dry but burning. I couldn't swallow or speak.

'Leave it,' Ido said, seeing what had happened.

So I did, dropping the two scarred pieces at the dusty roadside.

With our new boy on my back and Ido pushing the trolley, we set out. A movement at the edge of sight made me stop. Two stunted street children were darting forward to grasp the two pieces of foam rubber with small greedy hands.

Then I watched them run away with our broken bed, and I was glad its story would go on.

Sleeping through Heartbreak

Marina Chichava

I lie in my dimly lit bedroom, with just the evening sky for light. Marcus sits delicately on the foot of the bed, and as I watch his silent form, he speaks, 'Do you remember ...?' I want to snap at him and say of course I remember, but I can't help but smile. 'I remember,' I calmly reply.

Josh was two when we celebrated our fifth wedding anniversary, Marcus had booked us into my dream hotel, but after a five-star three course meal all we wanted to do was get home and be with our baby. And I knew my love for Marcus could never reach any limit, it was impossible. That night after we made love we lay there and he murmured, 'I can't imagine sharing this moment, this minute, this bed with anyone else but you.'

That moment seems like a distant memory. Now we are alone in our bedroom, and I feel trapped in a house that isn't mine, as if I am wearing someone else's shoes, walking through someone else's life.

Yet deep down I know this is my life, and this is the house I have lived in, been happy in and most importantly been in love in. There is nothing foreign about this place, perhaps just me. I am a shadow, a reflection if you will, of a brighter spark. In so little time life has turned upside down and time has ceased to make any sense to me. I have often wondered how love could be broken, how it could not be enough. So many times I've laughed at people who said love never dies, and if it does, they said, it was never true love. I'd known so little on the subject I never argued. But things are different now. Love has forgotten me, Cupid has detonated a bomb in my heart.

For the past six years I'd learnt to depend on Marcus, to always expect him to be there yet never take him for granted. I never expected

this. I guess a part of me knew that real life fairytales might not always have happy endings. I wish they'd written a bit more about what happened to Cinderella (or any other fairytale Princess you may prefer) and Prince Charming after they got married and rode into the sunset. Did they really live happily ever after? Was Cinders not ticked off one day when the Prince stayed out late, or went out on a drinking binge on the day she'd told him that she'd invited his parents over for dinner? Well, if she hadn't been she should have written a book about how the rest of us should deal with it. Better yet she should have written a book about how to find 'happily ever after' at a time when the experts say one in two marriages ends in divorce.

I lie here on our bed, and I no longer feel connected. I can no longer smell him, or hear his mild snore (I'm being kind, it was anything but mild), or feel him reaching out to me, or covering me up when he gets home late and sees the duvet on the floor. I want so much to feel him, his touch. I want to feel again. I want to feel more than the anger I find myself stuck with out of some kind of duty and responsibility to happy endings. Why do I feel this way? The fairytale gods have turned my life into a living nightmare. All that remains are a few memories printed on photographs and those haunting my dreams. And it dawns on me that all I have left is a bad dream that will never end.

So I sit up and I weep. I weep for all the kisses we will never share, for all the joy we will never experience, for all the times we will never say I love you, for all the times we will never again make love on this bed. Most of all I weep for all the times Marcus'd come home late, for all the times I'd been mad at him, for all the fights we'd had and for all the times we'd gone to sleep angry. I cry until my eyes hurt and all I can remember is love walking out the door.

'Remember the good times. Remember the first time,' Marcus demands in a whisper. And I am taken back to the beginning of our love story. The day I had been so sure, so definite that we belonged to the 'Forever Club'.

'I remember you.'

* * *

We were in high school together before he moved. He was a couple of years above me.

'I'm Marcus, Julia's bother,' he'd said looking down on me. I was slightly taken aback as I was, after all, having a personal moment. I'd just been through a semi-mutual break-up, hated all men and was stuck with the unlikely chore of finding a bed for my new apartment. Lying on a bare mattress in the middle of a department store, with bloodshot eyes and a fat lip (having tripped and fallen after a few too many beers), was not the ideal occasion to be meeting up with a guy I'd had a crush on in high school. I'd sat up on the bed and wondered if I'd put on any make-up that morning.

'Are you okay? You don't look so good.'

I guess I didn't. 'Hey, I'm okay. I'm just trying to buy a bed for my new apartment. I've just broken up with my boyfriend – ex-boyfriend, I've got to get used to saying that. Anyway, I made the mistake of moving in with him and here I am a couple of months down the line buying my own furniture.' I was rambling. I always did ramble on when I was nervous.

'Gee, sounds like a tough break,' he'd said. 'But I think that's a good model, I've got one just like it.' He pointed at the bed I had been sprawled on. 'The mattress is pretty great. It'll help you sleep through the heartbreak.'

I laughed at that. Somehow it made me feel better than I looked. He always did manage to make me laugh, even when we argued. What was it about him that completely drew my attention? I wasn't that schoolgirl with feelings for Julia's older brother anymore, yet I felt myself acting like one. With a wink and a smile he walked away then. In retrospect it should have been a day like any other. I should have walked out of the store and gone about running errands trying to furnish my apartment on a budget as any sensible twenty-two-year-old would do. But as always fate intervened and I'd found him standing outside waiting. 'It's Jo right? Are you busy? I was just about to go have coffee at this really great café around the corner and I was hoping you'd join me.' I told him a few years later that before he even asked me I already knew I would have gone anywhere with him. I'd never been that decided about anybody. It usually took a few telephone conversations and emails for me to actually start getting interested in even dating a guy and there he was getting a yes out of me with little to no effort.

We walked to the coffee shop around the corner, which was only four blocks away, but we talked about everything that crossed our minds,

and by the time we got there anyone who seeing us walk by, would have thought we were old friends. As we delved further and further into conversation the more I realised Marcus was as close to perfect as perfect could be. Later, in my vows, I said how perfect he was for me. Within hours the shop was closing and being the only ones left behind, I suggested it was time to leave. He got up, put the 'Closed' sign on the door and came back to sit down saying, 'It's okay it's my place, we can stay as long as we want.' He had always been a tad mysterious, not to mention cheeky. After school Marcus had gone on to do a law degree, found it unfulfilling and to his family's disappointment had quit before graduating, choosing to open a coffee shop instead. I remember admiring his courage, his audacity. I'd wanted so many times to break free from everyone else's expectations of me that to me he was so refreshing, so honest.

Eventually we closed the shop and walked in the unusually warm July night stopping only to admire a few landmarks and discuss how much we loved the city. I think it was the fact that we were so at home with each other, that made me ask him back to my apartment. A part of me didn't want the night to end. I could have stayed up until four in the morning. Marcus followed me upstairs into my humble flat, which later I found out was so different from his penthouse 'apartment'. I showed him my one luxury, a cappuccino machine I'd bought on a trip to Italy. We shared more than just a love for good coffee. He moved closer to me, reached up his hand up and stroked my face, as his inched closer. He kissed my neck. And his cell phone rang. 'I'm sorry I have to take this,' he said, and stepped into the other room. I thought about the fact that he had just been about to kiss me and wondered if, when he got off the phone, he would pick up from this moment

As he spoke in the next room, all my insecurities flooded in. I kept thinking this had to be a dream, I couldn't be here today with him. I'd been through so much in my life and I'd never thought I deserved happiness, let alone with someone like Marcus. I had started pacing by then, trying my best to be cool but I could feel myself heating up. In my mind I just kept repeating, 'Hang in there. Don't sweat it.' But maybe he was on the phone to a girlfriend? Men nowadays, who could trust them? I panicked. 'Don't sweat it.' I made coffee. He must have been on the phone for less than ten minutes, but to me it seemed like at least an hour. When he came back into the kitchen he looked saddened,

almost defeated. It was his mother. She had been sick for a while and she had taken a turn for the worse. He had to be there with her. I said I understood of course. Yet a part of me was resentful at her for spoiling my moment. I never told him that. It had always seemed inappropriate and a little cruel, especially since she'd live to torment me throughout our years of wedded bliss – if you could call them that.

His flight was already booked and he would be leaving in a few hours. I was as overwhelmed as when he'd first spoken to me earlier that day. He held my hand for what seemed like an eternity, but in reality added up to less than thirty seconds, kissed my cheek and was gone. Out the same door he'd just walked through a few minutes earlier, when everything seemed so clear cut. I felt an absolute sense of loss.

I yearned so much for the bed that would only be arriving a couple of days later. I had felt the chemistry, and somehow it seemed our fateful meeting was part of my purpose, a *raison d'être* if you will. I ran to the window to see him one more time, as from this moment on it was up to whatever fate had in store and I couldn't risk not seeing him again. I looked out and just as he got into the cab he looked up and waved. As I waved back it dawned on me, I didn't even have his number.

Do we ever really know what the future has in store for us? And if we could know would we really want to? We go through horoscopes and all other forms of predicting the future as if we could somehow change what is destined, if it's not to our liking. Marcus used to complain about how I was always reading horoscopes or getting my fortune told, how he thought it was a waste of time. 'People should worry about living and not plan it, just go out there and do it,' he often said right before he asked me what was in store for the 'Cancerians' that week. I had told him that since our first date I'd believed that he was my soul-mate and that he was always destined to come back to me. Although several weeks passed by, I kept reading every day hoping to find some sign that I didn't have to worry, that somehow we were written in the stars.

Three weeks later I was leaving my apartment when he turned up in a cab. He'd just gotten back. His mother was slowly recovering and she'd already left hospital, was back home being well looked after. I'd been on my way to buy groceries, but at that moment shopping was the furthest thing from my mind. I asked him upstairs, but he couldn't wait. We kissed. Yes, just like that we kissed. This was my cue; I was back in my fairytale love story. I led him upstairs to my apartment, through my

door, through my kitchen and to my bedroom. We went to that very same place where we were first together once upon a time, where all sorrows were forgotten and new futures could be dreamt. For the next few days we spent our time there, in bed, whilst we spoke about our past, present and what we hoped was our future. I wanted two boys and a girl, and he wanted all girls. Could never agree on names though, but there was plenty of time to talk him around. We discussed politics, religion and wondered why people wasted their time pondering the meaning of life instead of living it. We disagreed and compromised, argued and made up, and in six months we were married. And to think we'd had no idea that those bedroom talks would become a part of our routine, a ritual which we brought with us into our new house.

It was there in bed that I had told him that I'd been named Joseph because I'd been born on that fateful day that my heavy smoker-drinker and all around full-life-living grandfather had finally received that dreaded visit from the grim reaper, and unlike all the other times such visits had almost occurred, strokes and heart attacks combined, death had simply not blessed him with witnessing the next morning's sunrise. My mother had been in labour when she'd received the news of old man Joseph's demise, and in her emotional turmoil told her husband the foetus struggling to escape the warm comfort of her womb, would be named after the man she'd known as Dad. He had listened intently as I told him how I'd gone through most of my life trying to prove that a name does not a person make, trying my best to be the complete opposite of old man Joseph. In our first year of marriage he'd held a party every day for twenty-three days so that I could catch up on past birthday parties I'd missed because in my house my birthday had always been day of mourning.

* * *

I am brought back from my reverie as Marcus gets up and moves towards the door. 'Where are you going? I ask, panicked. He reaches for me and whispers, 'I don't live here anymore, remember?' And now I'm mad. 'Why is life so unfair?' I scream, and reach for him. 'We were so close, we had so much left to explore with each other so much more to find out as a couple. We had so much left to give each other. What happened to the power of love? How could love not have kept us together? You were

meant for me, and now you say I should move on, but I can't let go. You saved me from an ordinary existence.'

All he does is stand there and wait for me to calm down.

'You made me feel real,' I say trying not to look at him. 'When I was with you I was so much more than a character in the vast book of the universe. You made me feel alive, every minute of the time we spent together. I remember looking into your eyes when Josh was born, and apologising for not giving you a daughter. You laughed through tears of joy and told me that this was the best gift I could ever have given you and yes, we could name him Joshua. I didn't think I could love you any more than I did at that moment.' From the corner of my eye I can see him smiling as he says, 'That's what you hang on to.'

I must have dozed off, because it is getting light outside now. But again time makes no sense here in the loneliest of places. The anti-depressants aren't helping, perhaps they never had. I feel drained and exhausted. I'd feel different if he still lived here. I hear his gentle footfall, he's getting into bed. I feel only warmth as he hugs me. I am still mad. I can't let him go. 'I won't let you go!' I whisper as I look deep into the eyes of the man I have been in love with all my life, although for most of it I didn't truly know it. I look at him and I ask, 'Why did you leave?'

But he isn't in my bed, he's standing across the room from me and through my tears I see he is visibly upset. I don't care. This is my chance to finally have my say. 'You think you can explain a month of lies in a letter? All this time you were lying to me, and you expect me to forgive you? To just let you back into my bed as if everything will be okay? I hate you!' I didn't mean it but I screamed it, as I clutched the letter for dear life hoping to catch my breath. I wanted to hurt him. I want him to see what his departure had done to me.

He looks at me and smiles, 'You're going to be okay. Trust me I know. You have Josh, and you're strong and you have to be strong for him. You're his mother, he needs you right now.'

I look at him sitting there so self-righteous as if he is going to come in and save the day. But I'm calm now. 'Why didn't you tell me earlier you were sick? I could have been there for you. Not just for the last month. You knew for more than a year and you never told me. You say there was nothing the doctors could do. We could have done something together, and I hate you for not giving me that chance. This past year I

watched you withdraw from me, and all the while I thought you didn't love me anymore. I kept dreading coming home sometimes, expecting to hear you say you wanted out of this marriage.' My voice cracks, I am falling apart again.

The man sitting on my bed says, 'I never went through a day when I didn't love you, you know that. Maybe I was a little more preoccupied the last year, but I let you know every chance I got. You know that. You remember that. It'll be alright Jo. You'll see.'

And I know he is right but even so I say quietly, 'How am I going to be okay when you're dead?'

I haven't yet said it out loud. I know that Marcus isn't really there, and he is no ghost. I am not about to start believing in ghosts because I've lost my husband. I know that the pills, the grief and coming back to our house is the cause of all this. I lie on our bed for a while longer, and I know I'll have to get up and go make it all right. Josh has been at my mother's for two days. I have to try and explain to him that his dad isn't coming back. Marcus died in his sleep two days before. He'd died of a brain aneurism, and as the doctors had reassured me, had felt no pain, unlike those left behind.

I've read about cultures that celebrate the life of a loved one upon death, and I know Marcus lived a good life and he would have been proud, but I am still grieving. Today is the day of his funeral. Last night I came back here to pick up some clothes. It won't be a long service, Marcus wasn't fussy. He wanted to make sure no one spent any more time than necessary grieving over him.

As I leave the house, I think about the letter Marcus requested I read at his funeral to explain to everyone why he had kept his condition a secret for so long. It had not been a selfish decision, I think, but knowing he could die at any moment, he didn't want his family and friends to suffer too much, waiting for him to go. Life with him had been beyond extraordinary. I will eventually make my peace with Marcus being gone, aided of course by the final words written in his letter: 'Death is not an end. Like the oceans, life is vast and unpredictable. And though I'm not with you, I pray you sleep through the heartbreak.'

A Natural Combination

Pamela Newham

From: Jessica Richards (mailto: Jessicar@bmail.com)

Sent: 6 November 2008

To: Timothy Richards <timrichards@fourstop.co.za>

Subject: Divorce settlement

Tim

My lawyer has told me not to contact you but I want you to hear this from me. There are two things that are totally non-negotiable – Sushi and the bed.

SUSHI

Reason: Even though we went to TEARS together and chose her, I was the one who had the idea of getting a cat in the first place so that makes her mine.

THE BED:

Reason: You may have bought the bed after spending hours searching online (or so you say) but it was a birthday present so it is legally mine.

Jessica

From: Jessica Richards (mailto: Jessicar@bmail.com)

Sent: 7 November 2008

To: Timothy Richards <timrichards@fourstop.co.za>

Subject: What about the bed?

Tim

How typical! You didn't write back agreeing – or more likely disagreeing – with what I had to say, you wrote me a poem. How is that supposed to solve anything? All it did was remind me that during the eight months we've been apart you have not changed despite what your/our friends say.

You never take anything seriously. I know you *think* you do. You say you care about the environment and animal and human rights. And I know you think writing poetry is serious business. How could I forget? For five years, every time I got the milk out, I saw that fridge magnet that said: 'Poetry is nearer to vital truth than history – Plato'.

Unfortunately, what has turned out to be more vital to me is to have someone who remembers to pay for electricity and water, who does not think that putting money away for a rainy day is 'spoiling his fun' or that owning a house 'will happen one day'.

Come to think of it, how are you surviving without me there to take care of all those mundane things you'd rather ignore? Of course, it's possible you've found someone else to run your life for you but as my friends are very cagey about what you've been up to – and I really don't care – I have no idea.

And while I'm talking about what was basically wrong with our relationship (I know you hate that word – tough), what's the problem with being organised anyway? You accuse me of not being spontaneous but at least I have some order in my life. Not everyone thinks that every day has to be a marvellous bloody adventure! And you actually wanted to bring a child into this chaos.

Anyway, this is all a waste of time. I am still waiting for you to give me a straight answer about the bed. If I understood the poem correctly I think you're saying it's fine for me to keep Sushi but you've said nothing about what you want to do about the bed. I need to know as I am moving to a bigger place in a couple of weeks and will finally have room for it. This is not a difficult decision. You have no room for a king-size bed now

or probably ever. I don't even know if you're still camping out at your mom's. It's a complete waste leaving it in Mark's warehouse even if he isn't charging us storage. I need to know soon.

By the way, I sincerely hope that you will not be at Charlie's party on Saturday night. Charlotte is my friend (even though I'm pretty pissed off with her for still staying in contact with you) and so I have custody. You've got enough of your own friends. STAY AWAY

Jessica

From: Jessica Richards (mailto: Jessicar@bmail.com)

Sent: 9 November 2008

To: Timothy Richards <timrichards@fourstop.co.za>

Subject: Last night's party

Well, what was I thinking? Of course you came to the party! I walked through the front door and there you were at the bar chatting up Deanna. I know you've always had a thing for her so don't bother to deny it. Not that I care. I am way past caring what you do with your life. However, it appears that you think you still have the right to interfere in mine. For example, whether Walter is my 'boyfriend' or not has absolutely nothing to do with you. Nothing!

And how dare you be rude to him? Asking him what car he drives and then, when he said a four-by-four, suggesting he check out his carbon footprint online was not funny. And if people want to have a vanity number plate on their car that's their business. It's also their business if they choose to eat meat. You and I might be vegetarians but to start blabbing about the TV show you'd watched on how the added hormones in cattle make men grow breasts, just as Walter was helping himself to the beef fillet, was offensive and juvenile. In your warped mind that might have been amusing but trust me, it wasn't. Neither, by the way, was I impressed that you wore the shirt I gave you for your birthday last year. And then to look at me and say, all innocently, 'Oh, did you give

this to me Jess?’ didn’t fool me for a second. I know you better than that – unfortunately.

As to your question whether I’m moving in with Walter, the answer is no. Well, not at the moment anyway. Yes, we did find the townhouse together, and when his lease is up on the place he’s renting now, the plan is he’ll move in with me. Not that you need to know all this but it’s the reason I need MY bed.

Jessica

From: Jessica Richards (mailto: Jessicar@bmail.com)

Sent: 10 November 2008

To: Timothy Richards <timrichards@fourstop.co.za>

Subject: Let me know about the bed!

Oh, *finally* a reply. Except, of course, you still haven’t answered the question and you’ve just managed to infuriate me even more.

Firstly, his name is Walter NOT Wolfgang. And what do you mean by calling him my Teutonic lover? Just because he’s an investment analyst (stop calling him an insurance salesman) does not make him boring and inflexible or whatever-the-hell ‘Teutonic’s’ supposed to mean. Walter may seem dull to you but he has a very good sense of humour. But what’s more important is he understands me far better than you ever have. I’d rather have someone who knows how to set the PVR decoder and change the oil in my car than someone who sends obscure poems. Walter does not complicate my life – he makes it easier!

And what do you mean it is inappropriate for me to move in with Walter before our divorce has been finalised? You wouldn’t know ‘inappropriate’ if it landed on your lap. Don’t make me laugh. Actually, I’ve just realised that, knowing you, this is meant as a joke.

Anyway, who said anything about moving in with him before the divorce has come through? I explained the situation. The quicker you

make a decision about the bed the sooner we'll be able to get on with our lives. Stop stalling.

Jessica

From: Jessica Richards (mailto: Jessicar@bmail.com)

Sent: 14 November 2008

To: Timothy Richards <timrichards@fourstop.co.za>

Subject: re: Valentine's Day

What do you mean why am I home on Friday night? We can't all be going out all the time! I'm playing solitaire (yes, I know, computer solitaire – my one vice). Anyway, what are *you* doing home on a Friday night?

Tim, why are you raking up the past? I have a feeling I'd be better off ignoring this but I've had a couple of glasses of Shiraz, so I'll answer it. By the way, what happened to that case we bought in Riebeek Kasteel last year? Oh, never mind.

Yes, I do remember that it is exactly nine months ago today that I told you I wanted a divorce. And, yes, I do agree that Valentine's Day was a pretty shitty day to do it. But, you have to believe me that I hadn't planned it that way and yes, I do owe you an explanation.

It started off so well, didn't it? The last thing I expected on my afternoon off was your phone call saying you'd cancelled your post-grad tutorial (your students must have been delighted) and were taking me on a picnic. How far was it? It seemed no more than half-an-hour out of town when you turned off the main drag and drove down that dirt track and I had to get out and open that rusty gate. It didn't look like much of a place to have a picnic, with that dilapidated Cape Dutch House and the overgrown garden (couldn't help thinking I would've preferred picnicking at a wine farm) but then I saw the setting with the koppies in the background and the stream with its willows and that huge Wild Fig at the back of the house. You were right it was a beautiful place for

a picnic. At first I was nervous about trespassing but it wasn't the most outrageous thing you've ever made me do.

What was the name of that tree we sat under and had our lunch? As always, you knew the names of the different birds. It all seemed so perfect. But, it wasn't. Not really. I had no intention of spoiling things but I was feeling as guilty as hell. You see, I'd already decided to leave you, Tim. There, I've said it. You were trying too hard because I'd made you miserable the week before when I'd suggested separating for a while. And then, before we knew it we were arguing over nothing and like most of our fights it turned ugly so quickly and then suddenly I found myself screaming that it was over and I wanted a divorce.

Now I'm getting depressed.

I want to ask you something. Why is the bed so important to you?

Jess

From: Jessica Richards (mailto: Jessicar@bmail.com)

Sent: 14 November 2008

To: Timothy Richards <timrichards@fourstop.co.za>

Subject: re: Ode to the bed

I shouldn't drink vino when I'm on my own. I've been reading your email and I'm dripping tears onto Sushi who's not impressed. Damn you! I have to keep reminding myself that you have a way with words. But, even so, your 'Ode to Our Bed' is making me sad.

I didn't know the bed meant so much to you. Or, as you say, it's not the bed itself, it's all those memories. Of course I remember it was the first serious item we bought after we were married. How could I ever forget walking into the bedroom of the cottage and there it was so huge it took up the entire room. I couldn't believe you'd managed to track one down – an original Stinkwood, a four-poster! At first I couldn't understand why you had chosen a bed like that but when you showed me the words

carved in Latin underneath the base I had to agree that it was meant for us. (Remember how we made up stories about the guy who had carved them and the woman he carved them for?) Omnia Vincit Amor. Of course, they appealed to your romantic side and I've never forgotten them either. They made the bed perfect.

And, of course I haven't forgotten those rainy days when we didn't get up at all. And how Sushi stretched herself out and we were always amazed that one small cat could take over so much of one mega-big bed. What did you used to say – a cat and a bed are a natural combination. D'you remember how furious your parents were when they'd driven all the way from Howick and we thought it was that weird girl from next door, so we didn't answer the door? And how you read poetry to me and I'd read the share prices to you. And the time you broke your leg and we discovered amazing ways to ... this is not helping.

And then wham! At the end of your email you hit me with THAT question: 'Is there a chance we can get back together, Jessie?' So that's what this is all about. I'll ask you one in return: Give me one good reason why we should.

From: Jessica Richards (mailto: Jessicar@bmail.com)

Sent: 14 November 2008

To: Timothy Richards <timrichards@fourstop.co.za>

Subject: re: Reasons

TEN reasons! You see you always go overboard! Okay, I've decided to ignore most of them because they're not good enough: number 6 'My mother likes you' and number 7 'Your mother likes me', ditto numbers 8 and 9 regarding brothers, sisters and grandmothers. I'm also not going to pay too much attention to numbers two (we've always wanted twins and won't it be fun practising?), three (no one finds me as funny as you do), four (we haven't seen the sun rise over the dunes at Sossusvlei yet), and five (if cats and beds are a natural combination then so are we). I'm also ignoring the first reason (Omnia Vincit Amor). So let's look at the one that most interests me, number 10 (I've changed). You say that but

I don't think it's that easy for people to change. Maybe you think you have but I see absolutely no evidence that you have. There was nothing at Charlie's party to suggest it. Not that I expected you to look any different (which, by the way, you do. You've obviously been working out). But you still managed to piss me off totally by being obnoxious to Walter, so no, from my point of view you have not changed.

Anyway, there hardly seems much point in all of this. I've moved on. I don't know whether things with Walter will work out but I believe I owe it to myself to find out. Maybe life with Walter won't be as exciting as it was with you but at least I'll have some real security. I agree with Walter – romance is highly overrated.

But as you don't seem able to, I've made a decision – if the bed means that much to you, and you really want it, it's yours. You can keep it.

I have to go now or I won't be able to get up for work.

Goodnight

Jess

From: Jessica Richards (mailto: Jessicr@bmail.com)

Sent: 15 November 2008

To: Timothy Richards <timrichards@fourstop.co.za>

Subject: sms

Tim

I've just received your text message saying 'You can have the bed'.
Thank you

Jess

From: Jessica Richards (mailto: Jessicar@bmail.com)
Sent: 16 November 2008
To: Timothy Richards <timrichards@fourstop.co.za>
Subject: Delivery of bed

Tim

So, to finalise what we discussed on the phone earlier, you'll borrow Mark's truck and bring the bed to the town house at 9am sharp on Saturday. Walter will have organised everything (I know you suggested dismantling it but Walter has assured me that's a waste of time and we won't have a problem getting the base up the stairs.) Thanks for offering to help but Walter's got it under control.

See you then.

Jess

From: Jessica Richards (mailto: Jessicar@bmail.com)
Sent: 22 November 2008
To: Timothy Richards <timrichards@fourstop.co.za>
Subject: What a disaster!

Dear Tim

Well, that certainly didn't turn out as planned. I can't believe Walter's measurements were so wrong. He assured me that we would be able to get the bed up the stairs, no problem. But I must say, I did think his plan to make a pulley and heave it over the balcony sounded crazy. And then when you suggested that it might not work, he was even more determined to do it his way.

Thank goodness, you saw it as it started to slide. My heart nearly stopped when I saw my gorgeous bed dangling in mid air in such an undignified way. I have no idea how you managed to prevent it from crashing to the

cement! How's your shoulder? You promised you'd have the doc take a look at it.

And I must apologise. It was totally unnecessary for Walter to call you all those offensive names. I thought he was going to have a coronary his face turned so red. I suppose it didn't help matters when, once the bed was back on the ground, we both couldn't help laughing. There was a funny side, after all! What did he yell at us? Something about only a couple of morons would want a four-poster bed, which, for some reason, set us off again! I haven't laughed like that since ... well, since I was with you ... But the end for him was when we were staggering around, hanging onto each other, finally collapsing on the bed.

Anyway, I still go cold – if it hadn't been for your quick thinking that would have been the end of our bed. You may as well know that earlier this evening I broke up with Walter. So here I am, after all that organisation, without a boyfriend or a place to stay. Go on, laugh.

Jessie

From: Jessica Richards (mailto: Jessicar@bmail.com)

Sent: 22 November 2008

To: Timothy Richards <timrichards@fourstop.co.za>

Subject: Tomorrow

It was very sensitive of you to say that you would not dream of laughing and that you were sorry to hear that I'd broken up with Walter. I don't believe a word of it but it was nice of you to say so. Do you think I could store the bed and the rest of my furniture in Mark's warehouse until I find a place to stay?

About tomorrow, Karen insists that we do something together. As she so sympathetically puts it, she doesn't want me lying around 'feeling sorry for myself'.

Nighty night

Jessie

From: Jessica Richards (mailto: Jessicar@bmail.com)

Sent: 23 November 2008

To: Timothy Richards <timrichards@fourstop.co.za>

Subject: Today

Dear Tim

Karen (the brat sister, the colluder with nearly ex-husbands) says that you are waiting for me to write this to you. I'm not allowed to phone or see you until I have made a decision. So here goes.

As you obviously know, even though I tried to put up a fight, Karen didn't take no for an answer, picked me up at eleven and whisked me off in her battered Corsa without telling me where we were headed. I only realised where we were when she turned down that dirt track, the same one we'd driven down on Valentine's Day. My heart started to pound and my palms got sweaty and as we drove through the gate I was nearly in a panic. This had to be the last place on earth I ever wanted to see again.

Karen ignored my pleas that we 'get the hell out of here' and climbed out of the car. Very reluctantly I followed her and that's when I noticed how different everything looked. For a start, the garden had been tidied up, the house had been freshly painted and the roof re-thatched.

Karen said, 'Come take a look' and when I turned she had that grin on her face, the same one she's practiced ever since she was a toddler and done something she thought was especially clever. The old steps up to the stoep had also been replaced and I noticed the window frames looked new. Then Karen took a set of keys out of her pocket and unlocked the front door.

I walked through the front door and although the house was empty it was obvious that as much work had been done inside as out. I peeped into the

lounge with a beautiful Victorian fireplace and gleaming wooden floors. Karen let me have a quick look at the kitchen and I noticed a wood burning stove before she hurried me up the passage to the end bedroom. The door was closed and I tried the brass door knob to find it locked. My highly irritating sister said, 'Close your eyes' which I did and I heard the click of the lock, the door creaking open ... and then she pushed me into the room and said, 'Okay, you can open them' and there it was in all its glory. The bed. It stood alone in front of the window with the morning sun lighting it up as if it were a leading lady on a stage. I walked slowly across to it and ran my hands over the smooth wood and then, to my sister's astonishment, I dropped onto my knees and felt under the bed until I had found the inscription. And I burst into tears.

So, Tim, that's what you've been doing for the past nine months. It took me a while to calm down but Karen brought out a flask and we sat on the stoep and had a cup of coffee.

Tim, why didn't you tell me last Valentine's Day? Karen says you had planned to tell me. You had the keys in your pocket and as soon as we'd finished our picnic you were going to take me inside and let me know your plans – that you wanted us to buy the house and fix it up together. Of course, we never got that far because of the fight and me asking for a divorce.

Would it have made a difference if I knew? Who knows? However, as my shrewd sister pointed out, that's water under the bridge. I can't believe that she and some of our friends have been helping you over weekends and during your July vac to get the place looking the way it does now.

What made you decide to keep the house after I left? Karen says it was your way of showing me that you could change and that you were ready to settle down, despite what I thought. Is that true?

So, that's it then. I have today to think about it. Karen says the answer is obvious. You want me back, you've done up the house to show me how much you care and all it will take for a blissful future is for me to move back in with you. No pressure, she says. I pointed out to her that the bed is already there. Apparently, that's no problem. If I want to go

ahead with the divorce, you'll move the bed and all my furniture into the warehouse and that'll be that.

But I have to make up my mind today. Right, no pressure. Here's the thing, though, maybe it's me who hasn't changed. I don't want to hurt you, Tim. And I am impressed, really I am, with the fact that you've tried. But you're still the same Tim and I'm still the same Jess. People don't really change do they? I think we're just too different. But then I think about those words carved under the bed: *Omnia Vincit Amor* – 'Love Conquers All' ...

It's ten minutes to six. I have until twelve.

Jess

The Artful Craft of Quilting

Anne Woodborne

Robert's face receded, his symmetrical features – watchful dark eyes, straight nose, mouth with its full upper lip – became indistinct, shifted into a stranger's hate-filled mask. His open hand, with eighty-eight kilos of force behind it, cracked across her face. Pain teared her eyes; her nose, cheek and mouth stung and throbbed. Her vision blurred as she fell backwards onto the bed. Robert hit me, she thought in surprise. She hadn't seen his rage coming. She put her fingers to her nose, felt the blood seeping from her nostrils, trickling sideways down her cheek onto the hunting scene of the damask bedspread. Real blood mingled with the blood of the woven antelope.

Robert bent over her. 'Look what you made me do,' he murmured. 'Tssk, tssk, silly Sybil.' Robert's face slotted back into place. His face wore its usual caring, charismatic look as he stared down at her, examining her as if nothing was amiss. He touched her face with the same fingers which had branded their imprint across her cheek.

'Sybil, Sybil,' his voice caressed her. 'Never do that to me. Never question or criticise me again. Never,' his face drew nearer, his lips kissed the corner of her eye, 'never let me doubt you for a second.'

'Never,' he kissed her bruised mouth, 'never.' He opened his mouth and sucked gently at her bottom lip. 'Never,' his tongue probed her mouth. He sank down on top of her. She felt his erection between her thighs. His hands parted her blouse, lips moving to the tender skin of her breast. She lay numb beneath his sensual ministrations, his seducing tongue, his caressing voice and fingers, stroking her senses. Words popped into her head. Incongruous words. Where had she heard them?

A slap and a pat. She throbbed again but not from pain. She wound her arms around him as he prised open her legs.

* * *

Sybil had left her mother's womb in a hurry. She was born precipitously on her mother's bed, delivered to the waiting smoothness of a hand-made patchwork quilt. Her mother had sacrificed the safety of a normal hospital delivery to her passion for perfection. She had sat stitching French knot pink rosebuds onto a lawn matinee jacket, disregarding the intensity of her labour pangs until her water broke. She barely had time to waddle to her bed, stripping off her maternity smock and skirt when Sybil made her appearance.

Sybil always said this first contact with soft satins and velvets, before she was enveloped in her mother's warm, sweaty arms, triggered her life-long love affair with quilts and textiles. In her teens, Sybil entered into another love affair, a passion for chess; intrigued by the black and white chequered board, itself a miniature quilt, and the tiny medieval pieces. Her chess teacher explained the hierarchy of chess players, using the medieval town as a model. 'First, the student as peasant or pawn learns the craft of chess, progressing by constant practice through the ranks of knight, rook, and beyond that, bishop, queen, king. Once the chess student reaches that level and leaves the medieval castle, he encounters the foothills of an almost perpendicular cliff and right at the top – barely visible – lives the chess grandmaster in splendid isolation.'

As Sybil learnt the exact moves of each piece from which they could never deviate, she was fascinated to discover that only the queen had complete freedom to move in any direction on the board, covering as many squares as the player wished. She heard of a woman grandmaster who could memorize all the chess pieces in play painted on the side of a moving bus in a matter of seconds. She admired people who could soak up information, with such single-minded concentration, like intellectual vacuum-cleaners. Sybil played chess regularly, began her ascent up the slopes of chess hierarchy for the love of the game, knowing she would probably never reach the pinnacle.

* * *

After Robert left for work in his pin-striped suit, carrying his lawyer's briefcase, Sybil looked at herself in the mirror. Her slender neck looked fragile, like a child's, the red stripes made a sinister pattern on her skin, smooth as alabaster, and the dancing blue lights in her eyes had vanished, leaving them dull with dread. She fingered her split lip and winced. Sybil climbed back into bed and sank into a stupor. She tried to understand why Robert had changed so much since the beginning of their love affair. It must be her fault, something about her to trigger such a metamorphosis. Now she felt like a rabbit caught in a snare, trapped in a relationship that had once been so sexually liberating.

This morning, a wintry dark Cape morning, she lay listening to the slashing torrents of rain. She pulled the duvet up to her chin and thought of her mythical namesake, the Sibyl who hung in her bottle and wished for death on the outskirts of ancient Cumae beyond the Bay of Naples. No doubt it was a man or god who brought her to that death wish.

'I'm happily unmarried,' she'd told Robert on their first date. He raised his eyebrows. 'No such thing,' he said, 'as a happy single.' He swept his eyes over the slim length of her body, coming to rest on her glossy dark brown hair, upswept eyebrows and delicately sculpted nose and mouth combining to produce a gamine charm, then embarked on a course of action to woo and seduce her into changing her mind. He introduced her to the seductive music of Piazzolla and the tango. He was as graceful and passionate a dancer as he was a suitor.

Sybil reflected frequently on the simple happiness of her previous single life – work, friends, an occasional lover. Above all, like the queen, her freedom of movement. She had never shared a bedroom until her marriage to Robert. Her bed, a massive brass frame with two mattresses on top of the springs, covered with silk sheets, a down duvet and a brilliant green taffeta patchwork quilt with inlays of intricate fans in glowing jewel colours, had been hers alone. Her bed was her think-tank, where she stoked her fire of creative energy.

'This is revealing,' Robert had whistled when he saw the opulence of her bed. 'I feel as if you've shown me a glimpse of your secret self. Sybil, my voluptuous sybarite.' And he'd pressed hot lips onto her neck, his eyes ardent in their dark gaze. The use of the personal pronoun might have rung a warning bell if Sybil had been alert, but she was in the throes of falling in love. When she saw Robert, her knees weakened, her heart shook, her breath vanished. The warm intimacy of his charming smile

could melt an iceberg. She quivered whenever he came close. She was undone by his magnetism and the romance of Piazzolla's tangos when their bodies were intertwined. Those throbbing musical preludes to love.

The first night she and Robert shared her French brass bed, she discovered another passion – for the intensity of Robert's lovemaking and the touch of skin on sweaty skin, specifically Robert Pacelle's skin on hers.

* * *

'Did you know?' Robert asked her as they were dancing a rumba in a darkened Latin-American Club, 'that William Shakespeare left his second-best bed to his wife in his will?'

'Why his second-best? Who did he leave his best bed to?' She tilted her head backwards to look into his eyes.

'Perhaps his mistress?' He smiled. 'His dark lady of the sonnets – someone as entrancing as you?'

* * *

Three days after Robert had hit her, Sybil drove to Rondebosch and parked under the spreading yellowwood tree outside the library. The Claremont Chess Club was housed in a small red brick building under the Rondebosch Bridge next to the railway line. She wore thick pancake foundation to disguise the fading stripes on her cheek, dark lipstick to hide her cut lip and a wig with sweeping curtains of hair.

Anthony Gladwin, an old opponent and mentor, was there. 'Ah, Sybil,' he rubbed his hands together after removing his gloves. 'Ready to be trounced?' Anthony, a semi-retired financial advisor who travelled overseas to take part in chess tournaments, had memorized all the Fischer/Spassky matches.

As she waited for his next move, Sybil remembered a morning when she'd slipped unnoticed into a courtroom at Wynberg Magistrate's Court where Robert was prosecuting a case of fraud. She'd seen how focused he was. His eyes had the laser-like concentration of a brain surgeon at work. He stood in his pin-striped suit, the tips of his fingers pressed precisely together and delivered his questions in crisp tones of authority. He demanded 'yes' or 'no' answers to questions that were deliberately

ambiguous. He drove witnesses into corners with the ferocity of his verbal attacks from which they emerged defeated, stuttering and unsure. The Judge ignored the Defence's frequent objections – 'badgering the witness'. In his summing up, Robert was articulate, thoughtful, confident, utterly believable.

Watching him in action, Sybil had wondered what chance she had of escape.

She started when Anthony said. 'Checkmate.'

She stared at the board. No way out. She knocked over her king in a gesture of defeat.

'I thought you would have noticed the Evans Gambit I used and started a countermove,' Anthony said. 'What's wrong, Sybil? Didn't you see it?' She shook her head. No, she hadn't seen it coming.

* * *

Sybil started four collections, three hidden. She filled a plastic bag containing pieces of bloodied sheets, blouses, pillow cases, nightdresses – even a patch of the bloody woven damask.

'I feel like Monica Lewinsky,' she told herself. 'Why am I keeping these bloodied patches of cloth? I should burn them.'

She had trouble hiding the bag. Robert's eyes searched every nook and cranny of the house. She knew he rummaged through her drawers and closets. Eventually she hid the bag in the unused maid's flatlet, in a rickety wardrobe. She locked the wardrobe door and the flatlet door. Kept the two keys hidden in a box of tampons.

She placed an armoury of disguises in her bedroom closet – a dark wig with sweeping side curtains of hair, thick Max Factor pancake foundation, cream rouge, sunglasses, scarves to knot around her neck, long-sleeved clothes. Elastoplast. Robert made no comment about these items.

She began to take mug shots of her bruised face, holding her digital camera at arm's length. She tried not to flinch when she viewed the stored photographs, tried to remain dispassionate about the unsightly evidence of abuse. She kept the memory card hidden in a pack of playing cards.

She hid books as well. Self-help books that almost flung themselves into her arms at the library and the bookstore. *The Stockholm Syndrome* –

Women who love Abusers. Women who Run with Wolves. Women who Love too Much. Misogyny, the Male Disorder. She knew what Robert would do if he saw those titles. Female psychobabble, he'd sneer, then throw them in the trash.

* * *

She was less successful at parrying questions from friends at the craft and chess clubs. Concerned looks. Gasps. 'Look at that bruise on your face, your arm. Sybil, what have you done to yourself?'

She learned to shrug a nonchalant shoulder. 'Silly me. I walked into a door in the dark. Remember the load shedding last week?' Or – 'I slipped as I was climbing out of the pool, hit my chin on the edge. Clumsy me.'

'Sybil! Be careful, take care of yourself.' Hands squeezed hers. Arms hugged her. But their eyes were carefully shuttered as if they didn't really want to see.

Her nervousness and fear around Robert began to irritate him.

'What's wrong with you?' he snapped. 'You always look so guilty. What have you been up to?'

She stammered.

'Sybil? Out with it.'

'You hurt me, Robert.' Why had she never noticed that cruel look in his eyes before?

'It's my Sicilian ancestry. I told you we were passionate about our women.'

'I'm a prisoner in this house. All these bruises ...'

'Don't exaggerate. Do I keep you under lock and key?'

How could she explain to someone who was so deaf? It wasn't just the disfiguring bruises but the depression that exhausted her. She barely had the energy to keep up appearances.

'What if I still had my work – my shop?'

'What? Sybil's Shabby Chic?' He snorted. 'Your 'décor' business? I told you in the beginning, Sybil, I'm old-fashioned. Sicilian men like to provide for their wives. Besides, the taxes. Not worth it. I give you a generous allowance. You don't go short of anything, do you?'

He could always silence her.

* * *

Norman and Iris Ashbury came to supper. Robert told her to take extra trouble as a hostess. Norman Ashbury was an important prospective client, one who could make Robert and his law firm a force in corporate cases. Robert's face wore an eager, tender look as he spoke to her. He pressed her arm, smiled into her eyes. 'Cook something special. Perhaps Chicken Cacciatore? And stuffed figs for dessert. Have your hair done and wear that dress I bought you. That red silk from Thailand? You look so sexy in it.'

Her spirits lifted. Robert was his old self. Her hidden collections, Robert's abuse, receded from her mind. Perhaps Robert suffered from temporary aberrations, momentary madness induced by stress. As she cooked and cleaned, she rationalised all the evidence. She should be more understanding, more supportive. Then the old Robert wouldn't disappear.

Robert beamed his approval at her efforts – the gleaming dining-room table, silver candlesticks, white roses clustered thickly in a glass vase. Norman and Iris Ashbury were as appreciative. 'What a beautiful table setting!' Iris exclaimed. 'My dear, how clever you are.' Robert poured wine for the pair in long-stemmed fluted glasses. He drank whiskey from a tumbler. Norman looked admiringly at Sybil as she carried in the platter of steaming Chicken Cacciatore, fragrant with tomatoes, olives, oregano and thyme, and set it on the sideboard. Her black hair was cut in a feathery cap. Her pansy-bright eyes searched the table as she catered to her guests' every need in her efficient, smiling manner.

Robert and Sybil entertained them with a patter of amusing travel tales, court room gossip. Sybil told them about her successful décor business.

'But, my dear, don't you miss it?' Iris asked.

'Robert is my business now.' Sybil was prompt in her answer. 'I want to make him happy.'

Robert smiled. He asked Norman and Iris about their grown children. Sybil saw Norman's plate was empty. She stood over him, bent to replenish it. 'Norman, more chicken, more salad?' Norman raised his eyes to Sybil, but seemed unable to get past the sight of her cleavage looming enticingly close to his face. Iris chattered on to Robert, didn't notice. 'My youngest son doesn't know what he wants to do, so he's

taken a gap year. Oh dear, it is worrying when they can't make up their minds.' She chewed her food, looking at Robert. Robert sensed Norman's paralysis and glanced sharply his way. He saw Norman staring down Sybil's dress, his pop-eyed, surreptitious look. Sybil straightened herself, dished more food onto Norman's plate, blushing from his unsolicited attention, then stepped back to the sideboard.

A cold despair settled on Sybil's shoulders when she saw the steely sparks in Robert's eyes but she rallied. Be the gracious hostess, she reminded herself.

'Tell me about your daughter, Iris. Is she still in London?' she asked, turning her attention to middle-aged, gaunt Iris, bent on staying as young as possible on a regime of punishing gym sessions, raw food and regular visits to the health spa to detoxify. Sybil saw an angular, aging woman, insecure and defenceless. Will I be like this in thirty years time, she wondered?

Robert was knocking back one tumbler of whisky after another. His eyes glinted when he glanced at her, but he kept up his gallant attention to Iris, his deferent approach to Norman. At midnight, Norman stood up to go. 'Thank you for a wonderful meal and conversation, but I have an early golf appointment tomorrow.' Robert helped Iris into her coat. Norman lifted Sybil's hand and placed a wet, clumsy kiss there. 'Charming, charming. You are to be congratulated, Robert.'

Robert walked them to their car. Sybil froze in the doorway. As they reversed out of the gate, Robert turned back, quickening his step towards Sybil and shut the front door.

'What was that about?' He glared. Put out his hand and pushed her.

'Wha – what do you mean?'

'Don't play dumb, Sybil, it doesn't suit you. You know what I mean.'

'No.'

'Must I spell it out for you? Sticking your tits in Norman's face. Christ, I could almost see his hard-on under the table. I wanted you to be attentive, Sybil, not to seduce him.'

'I wasn't. You told me to wear that dress – you said ...'

'Never mind what I said. Christ. Were you trying to breastfeed him?'

Sybil paled. She fell silent.

Robert shoved her down the hall into the bedroom, taunting her.

‘Do you think I’ll win contracts if you come on to the clients?’

He dragged her into the bedroom with ferocious energy. She smelt the whiskey on his breath. Felt the heat of his hatred. She closed her eyes to shut out the menace of his livid face and swinging arms as he yanked her hair. Sybil couldn’t breathe, think or speak. Adrenaline coursed crazily through her blood, telling her to run, but could she outrun Robert?

‘Stop it,’ she choked in a weak squeak.

‘I’ll stop it alright, when you learn to behave like a real woman,’ he snarled. He ripped her dress, underwear, off her, then hit her, slap, across the face. She fell heavily on the bed. He tore off his trousers and jumped on her, sitting astride her as if she were a mare. He slapped her breasts so that they bounced from side to side. He spat words at her – cazzo, porca, puttana – leaning over her, the veins pulsing in his temples, his eyes bloodshot. Sybil closed her eyes, her head whirling, then felt herself floating out of her body, only dimly aware of Robert’s savage thrusting and grunting.

* * *

She came to wakefulness slowly these mornings, surfacing reluctantly from dreams where she was back in the womb, a curled foetus immersed and caressed by wavelets of warm amniotic fluid. The only sound she heard was the muffled thumping of her mother’s heartbeat, followed by the tiny echo of her own. Sybil, once in such a hurry to be born, now dreamed incessantly of being back in the womb. Her mother had always said – ‘Sooner or later, everybody is disappointed in love.’

Disappointment was an understatement, Sybil thought. She had married a prince, charismatic and attentive, then woken up one morning to find a toad, malignant and abusive, sitting on her pillow.

Drugged by despair, trapped in deception, Sybil staggered through her days blindly. Robert had been aloof since the night of the rape. He maintained a stance of injured self-righteousness. She was bruise-and pain-free for the moment.

At a craft meeting two weeks later, Sybil sat stitching a traditional log cabin patchwork quilt, her mind lulled by the repetitive work. A woman, Sybil knew her only as Glenda, held up her hands to display

two new rings. Joy beamed from her brown eyes, her voice was husky with emotion. 'Look, everybody. My husband gave me these for our anniversary. He told me that my hands were his most precious possession. They care for him and our children every day in sickness and health. He couldn't imagine a day without my hands working for the family from morning to night. These rings,' she twisted them round her work-worn fingers, 'are a small token of the way he treasures my hands.'

Sybil felt a queer surge of pain twisting in her stomach, knifing through her chest. She looked down at her own hands, once so deft and competent. Hands that could do anything, make anything. Hands that had shaped her life, her career. As she stared at her busy fingers pulling the tiny needle through cotton layers in rows of immaculate stitches, she saw a sudden glimmer of hope. These hands might set her free.

At home, she took out the bag of bloody cloths from the rickety cupboard of the maid's room. She sat on the floor and laid them out in front of her. The pieces were crumpled, the blood dried in dark patches, crusting the material. She set up an ironing board and steamed the pieces into a semblance of smoothness. She sat at the dining room table and measured squares, 25 by 25 centimetres.

A strong conviction of her worth, of what she could achieve, grew as she worked. The image of her squares grew as well, the impact they would have when joined. She worked on cutting the squares until late afternoon, then packed them away in small piles, secreting them between the two mattresses of the old brass bed in the spare bedroom.

She braced herself for Robert's return, knowing there was a shift in her demeanour and he would sniff it out at once. She composed herself as she prepared the evening meal – chopping onions, wiping away the tears, braising meat, adding finely cut chillies. Robert liked spicy food.

He came into the kitchen, and watched her stir onions and steak. He poured whiskey into a glass.

Sybil felt his eyes boring into her – as if he sensed something already.

'Where have you been today?' he asked.

'I went to my craft club meeting,' she said.

'Oh. And what did you do there?'

'Worked on my quilt.'

'Show me.'

She wiped her hands on her apron, fetched the log cabin squares from her big craft bag in the hall. She emptied the pieces onto the kitchen table. He picked them up.

'Is this all the work you did today? How long were you at the craft club?'

'Three hours. It's painstaking work, Robert.' He heard the note of asperity in her voice, glanced at her sharply.

'Who did you see today? Where else did you go? How long were you there? What time did you get home? What have you been doing since?'

She stayed calm under the barrage of questions. To do anything else would be to invite Robert's anger.

She felt Robert's eyes on her, speculative, appraising, while they ate. Robert drained three tumblers of whiskey as she struggled with mundane conversation. She carried the dishes to the kitchen. She felt his breath on her neck as she scraped plates at the kitchen sink.

'Sybil.'

She didn't answer.

'Sybil,' he put his arms around her from behind, 'you know if you ever try to leave me, I will find you and bring you back. Wherever you are.'

His hands moved over her body. He whispered in her ear, hissing between his teeth. 'S-sybil, whatever it is you think you can do, forget about it. Don't think you can surprise me with a pawn storm tactic.'

He caressed her breasts, her thighs, his breath warm on her neck. She steeled herself to withstand hands that could reduce her to compliance.

* * *

Sybil lost herself in an orgy of work. She sat hunched over her sewing machine in the spare bedroom all day so that her back ached and her eyes strained from looking into the bright light above the sewing foot. She threaded corded cotton into the embroidery foot, set the machine to satin stitch, put her foot on the pedal and watched as the needle flashed in and out, whisking thread over the cord to form raised letters. Under the control of Sybil's deft hands, the Bernina embroidered words at breakneck speed on each square. She thought of Bobby Fischer. He

always played fast, at maximum intensity. He was good at exploiting minute advantages, Anthony had told her. The needle flashed and whirred.

She took her mug shots to be silk-screened onto calico. She shielded herself from curious looks by wearing a broad-brimmed hat and sunglasses. Even so, she'd cringed when she'd turned to leave the shop with her packet and heard the young assistant saying to her colleague. 'Did you see her photographs? Somebody's been knocking her around.'

She cut the silk-screened calico into squares, machine embroidered sentences at the bottom. She took the little sheaths of her short dark hair, pulled from her head the night the Ashburys came, from a plastic bank bag, laid them onto squares of material and couched them there with gold thread.

Every day the pile of squares grew. She divided them into smaller piles and hid them between the mattresses of her old bed. She lived in dread of Robert returning home unexpectedly during the day.

Some mornings Sybil draped herself over her machine in exhaustion, tired of hours of repetitive work, tired of maintaining a cheerful façade for Robert. She wanted to sink into oblivion, fall asleep forever, dream she was back in her amniotic sac. She remembered Bobby Fischer's burning will to win. I can win, she told herself, I can be Bobby Fischer, I can finish this quilt. She set her foot to the pedal again, the needle whirred up and down. The squares became strips, then blocks. Finally, all forty-nine squares were completed, joined and quilted. Sybil was unable to look at the finished bedspread. She hid it under her Scarlett O'Hara green quilt.

* * *

The morning of the quilt hanging arrived. Sybil packed a suitcase of clothes, a carton of books, the Scarlett O'Hara quilt in one carrier bag, the exhibition quilt in another. She left behind the brass bed, her Bernina, her armoury of disguises, and her marriage to Robert Pacelle.

Many quilts had been hung in the hall of the Cellars by the time Sybil arrived. Some were bright and flamboyant, others were quaint and subdued but all were lovingly, beautifully pieced together in celebration of home and bed. Sybil's knees knocked as she took her quilt out of the carrier bag. Her hands trembled as she pushed a rod through the loops,

swung herself onto the two-step ladder and hung the rod on waiting hooks. She pulled the quilt straight and stepped down from the ladder. She moved back a few steps then looked for the first time at the quilt in its entirety.

The Chair Person, Elaine bustled up to her. 'Have you put up the title of your quilt, Sybil?' She peered at the white placard on the wall on which Sybil had penned in red – The Quilt of Wife-Beating Crimes.

Elaine's voice changed as she murmured the words to herself, her eyes moved to the quilt. She and Sybil stared up at the montage of bloodied patches, images of her battered, bruised face. Purple, red, green, yellow. Hair sewn onto patches and in the middle, a patch of green woven damask seemingly unblemished, but which would on closer inspection, reveal Robert's dried semen.

Elaine gasped. Sybil thought she would faint at the sight of her accumulated abuse, her shame and humiliation. Other women crowded around, looking up at the patchwork of pain. They stared at the short satin-stitched sentences underlining each bloodied patch, each mug shot. Glenda read them aloud. My Crime: I am a woman. My Crime: My child-bearing attributes make me vulnerable to abuse. My Crime: I am a woman, therefore illogical and hysterical. My Crime: I try to seduce my husband's clients. My Crime: I forgot to fetch the dry-cleaning. My Crime: the supper was too hot. My Crime: I criticised my husband. My Crime: the supper was cold. My Crime. My Crime. My Crime.

Glenda's voice faded away. Tears came into her eyes. She choked. 'Sybil, I had no idea.' Women murmured in shock. Sybil wanted to disappear under the volley of their gazes. She could see what they were thinking. Why had she stayed for so long? Ah, but none of them had known the other charming, oh, so desirable Robert, the Robert she kept hoping would return. The silence grew thick with unspoken comments of horror. An elderly crafter, Ethyne, spoke. Her cheeks were mottled with puce, her faded, lashless eyes swivelled on Sybil, the fat wobbled under her chin as her thin, pursed lips moved. 'This is scandalous. Elaine, you cannot leave this monstrosity hanging. It will lower the standard of our exhibition. It is an abomination.'

'You're right, Ethyne,' Glenda said. 'It is an abomination. But not in the sense that you mean. It is an abomination that Sybil has been hurt. It is an abomination that we keep silent about it.' Her sharp eyes

rebuked the older woman. There was an outcry as everyone voiced an opinion. Elaine silenced them. 'Sybil? What do you say?'

'My husband is a powerful and articulate man.' She said. 'My quilt speaks more eloquently than I can.'

'In that case,' Elaine said, 'it stays. Controversy never harmed an exhibition.'

'My lawyer will remove it as evidence later,' Sybil said over her shoulder as she left, unable to bear their scrutiny any longer.

My lawyer? I haven't got one, she thought. She would retreat to a shelter for battered women until this was all over. Perhaps their counsellors could recommend one. She drove through the Constantia countryside, beautiful in its lush greenery, past the manicured gardens and shuttered mansions. She turned into Chelsea Wynberg, past Maynardville, right into Church Street and stopped outside the blue-black monolith of the Magistrate's Court.

Over one hurdle, on to the next. She stepped through the metal railing gates, up the stairs, through the glass doors. She stopped at the front desk, took off her dark glasses and said to the policeman on duty.

'I want to lay a charge against my husband.'

The Capable Wife

Rita Britz

Wailing sirens and flashing lights were a rare and uncommon sight in our village. As I rushed out the front door, into the street, I could see the emergency services, police, and the local undertaker, Blackie Swartz's 'Black Maria' parked in front of Nora's house.

'Blackie, what's going on?'

'Evening, evening,' Blackie greeted me in his official tone of voice. Unlike the Blackie one would find guffawing around the braaivleis fire. Unlike the Blackie who would reply to your question about his wellbeing with a mask of feigned seriousness: 'Business is dead.'

This was not the Blackie who, tongue in cheek, put an ad in the local newspaper advertising tombstones with a 'lifelong guarantee'. No, this was Blackie in suit, collar and tie, with a deadpan expression on his face. Tonight he was in his official capacity as ferryman for the dead.

* * *

I had seen Fanus only once before in his life and that was the time Nora attempted to construct a water feature in their garden.

There was big commotion on the other side of the fence. This made me curious and I simply had to peep through the slit in the wooden fence which separated our property from theirs.

Fanus was standing with his parents, who shared the house with Nora and Fanus, with his hands on his hips. Both men were shirtless with their overly inflated abdomens bulging like freshly kneaded bread dough expanding over their trousers. I could not believe that the human body had the capacity to grow to such enormity.

Nora had confided in me that she did not find it difficult to share a house with her in-laws. Her mother-in-law did not talk much, neither

did she interfere. In fact, she left all of the household chores to Nora. They did not have any of that nonsense of 'too many cooks spoiling the broth'. Her mother-in-law never criticized her, never gave any advice and never had any suggestions. Not when Nora started redecorating the entire house, not when she started gardening by tidying up the overgrown plot of land which was littered with old car wrecks, tyres, overgrown rockeries and an assortment of rusty metal equipment which had fallen into disuse over the years. Certainly, no one interfered when Nora decided to give up her job at the chemist to take control of the chicken farming enterprise.

Fanus and his parents, it seemed, on account of Nora's zeal – Nora was running a lucrative business and had a very patient credit card facility – had more than enough time on their hands to spend all her hard earned cash supporting the Home Shopping Channel. 'They hardly leave the house,' she said. They also had enough time on their hands to sit and enjoy watching Nora as she prepared the most scrumptious meals the way only a good wife could. Dishes rich in cream and real butter, also the most delicious desserts, cakes and home-made sweets which she would sometimes bring me to taste.

* * *

I still remember the day we moved into the neighbourhood. How astonished I was, fresh from the big city, by the generosity of true country hospitality. Nora surprised us, the new couple, with an unexpected and most welcome meal of succulent lamb cutlets prepared with rosemary, lemon and freshly ground black pepper. And as she was babbling away ebulliently, that first meeting, I could see her intelligent eyes summarising her surroundings in a few glances. She remarked on the collection of herbs that I had carted along with me from my previous garden.

'Ha!' she said, 'Herbs! How I love herbs; I use herbs for absolutely everything. Do you know a lot about herbs? My friend, Limakatso taught me a lot about herbs and medicinal plants.'

Once we listened together to Carmina Burhana, with the volume turned up. I explained to her that the words meant something in the vein of 'we shall rise up or else we shall vanish'. On another visit, over a cup of rooibos tea, Nora told me the story of how Fanus had first made eyes at her nine years ago. How thrilled she was when Fanus, a member

of the local rugby team had started to frequent the chemist with some or other 'ailment' seeking her advice. 'And whenever he came into the shop,' she said, 'he took special care in his appearance.' Donned a fresh pair of khaki shorts, and a two-tone shirt (those that one could buy from the co-op), she told me; he was clean-shaven and even took the trouble of generously splashing himself with Adidas aftershave lotion.

But she had never told me what an over-sized man he had become!

* * *

'A little more to the left, Nora!' 'Steady now, steady now!' 'Watch out for the roots of that tree behind you!' 'Almost there ... almost there!' The two men shouted encouragingly, the time they were meant to be helping Nora prepare the spot for the water feature.

Then Fanus nudged his father with his elbow and with a wheezing laugh remarked: 'Typical of a woman, hey Paw? Needs instructions!' and together the two of them hooted, sniggered, cackled and snorted, lard vibrating under glistening skin.

The mother-in-law, standing aside like an overgrown mushroom recovering from a lobotomy, did not utter a word. She merely stood there, her several chins stacked in layers like a tiered wedding cake on top of her enormous bosom. Her eyes were mere slits in the vast landscape of her unfortunate face. I could not detect a neck of any kind.

Those were my impressions of Nora's husband and in-laws.

As for Nora, it was our friend, Limakatso who referred to Nora as 'Pelobohloko'. When I asked 'What does that mean?' Limakatso said: 'Pelobohloko is the one with pain in her heart,' with a despondent look in her eyes. 'How that woman can find so much love in her heart to give away to others, when she is never fed with any love herself, is a miracle. Her fountain of love never seems to dry up, even though she has pain in her heart.'

Whether she enjoyed running the family or not, according to Limakatso she was more than a good wife – just like it says in the Bible: 'Who can find a capable wife? She is worth far more than jewels! Her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil.'

* * *

Some months after Nora built the water feature, she came over to break the news that her poor mother-in-law had passed away. 'God's Will,' she said: 'The Lord gives, and He takes away ... She will be sorely missed ...'

Then her voice changed to a confidential whisper: 'In the end, Mother suffered from terrible heartburn, you know, so I tried to nurse her with extract from the bark of the Weeping Boer Bean Tree.' Nora put her hand in her pocket and, lying in the palm of her hand, was a muslin bag tied with red string. Somewhat like bouquet garni, I thought. Then she untied the string and inside were a few pieces of bark which resembled cassia. 'Limakatso gave this to me ... she is so wise when it comes to natural remedies. Mommy had a little bit of a weight problem, she also suffered from piles, but if you brew tea from this bark of the Weeping Boer Bean tree, it works miracles. It contracts the blood vessels so nicely!'

At the time, I was unable to fathom her true feelings as she looked more perplexed than sad. I supposed that she had a lot on her mind. She spoke mechanically, as if she was reciting words she so often heard people use under such circumstances.

'The family decided to have Mommy's body cremated. The ashes are kept in an urn on the mantelpiece. She will be in our midst forever...' Nora contemplated. 'Yes, Fanus is so heartbroken about his mother's passing that he won't even get up out of bed, he is so depressed.'

A few weeks later, Nora came over to tell me that her father-in-law had also passed away. I supposed that the poor man must have been heartbroken, or something, after his wife died.

'It is fortunate that I kept the leftovers from Mommy's funeral in the deep freeze we had plenty to eat at the reception after Daddy's funeral,' Nora said. 'Now there are two urns on the mantelpiece. Poor Fanus is now completely bedridden. I think you noticed, but I commissioned a building team to enlarge the entrance to the en suite bathroom and I've had the TV installed in Fanus's room.'

* * *

Now there was more bad news: 'It's Fanus,' Blackie Swartz said, 'he's dead.'

Inside the house, I was surprised to find the atmosphere to be akin to a carnival, rather than a tragedy, after another death in the family. A crowd of people was gathered in the foyer, all talking at once, gesticulating, shouting orders to one another.

Someone was asked to fetch his toolkit. There seemed to be a 'logistical' problem as to the 'agronomics of this operation'. Apparently, Fanus's body was too big to be moved with the usual dignity reserved for the dead.

I remembered the time I accompanied Nora on a shopping trip to the city. She needed to buy fabric. Kilometres and kilometres of the stuff. Her family couldn't buy clothes off the peg anymore, she said. There was no 'Fat and Friendly' section, neither a big and 'Big and Beautiful' section, nor an 'Enormous but Amorous' section of any of the stores in the village. Nora sewed all their clothes herself. Where she found the time to do that, I do not know.

I caught a glimpse of Fanus's monstrous blobby body overflowing the edges of the double bed, in folds, creases, wrinkles and crinkles in true Kafkaesque hideousness. A mass of white lard with black, wiry warthog hair protruding from enlarged sweat pores here and there. Could it be possible that there once was a flicker of brain activity hidden somewhere amidst this maggot's mound of flesh?

I felt a cold chill running down my spine even then, when I heard someone shouting down the passage of Nora's house: 'All doors to the exit have to be unhinged and the doorposts removed.' I think it was the dominie, taking charge of an already chaotic situation.

'Bring ropes!'

Then the body was rolled up, mattress and all, like a hot diggidy dog.

That done, all the men of the neighbourhood worked together in an extraordinary undertaker's undertaking. They heaved, pushed, pulled, lifted, and shoved, like rugby players in a scrum. One could almost expect them to spontaneously burst out singing 'Shosholozza' in unison, the way workmen do. But no, it was too solemn an occasion, it would have been inappropriate.

It was then I noticed Nora standing inconspicuously in the corner of the living room, nervously nibbling away on her bottom lip in the shadows. Her eyes followed Captain Henderson as he walked through the house, taking notes.

I went to her and put my arm around her. 'Come Nora,' I said soothingly, as if to a child, 'let me help you. Perhaps we should get some of the furniture out of the way,' I suggested.

In the entrance hall was a small table. I scraped car keys, cash slips, hairpins, buttons, paperclips, rubber bands and matches off the table in a pathetic attempt to make myself useful. In the semi-darkness I noticed that I had missed something. Just as I was about to reach out, Nora's hand flashed out, snatched something up and clutched it tight.

Standing face to face, her eyes ablaze with feverish fervour, the shocking realization hit me, of how unnaturally yet breathtakingly beautiful her clear blue eyes were. But oh, how cold, cold, cold. How very lifeless those stunning blue eyes were! I was dumbstruck and mealy mouthed. I had to suppress the impulse to grab her by the shoulders and shake her back to life.

She took a deep breath as she regained her composure. I saw her pulling her shoulders back, and proudly lifting her chin.

Wordlessly she put the bark of the Weeping Boer Bean tree in her pocket.

Lie Still Heart: Scenes from a Girlhood Devoured

Gothataone Moeng

It was the floor. It was the coldness of the floor that jarred her into remembering. Not Leano's hands that tentatively squeezed her behind, nor his breath that came raggedly at her ear. It was the coldness of the untiled, cement floor that sent Realeboga right back to the years of her childhood. The years when she used to hide out under her bed, staring up at the bedsprings and at the lumpy mattress that sagged on top of them. Lying in silence, holding her breath and wishing that her heart would stop beating so loudly.

At first she had thought it was okay. Nobody protested when the man visited their home. In fact Mama and Aunt Phetso and the other kids seemed to love him. He brought so much cheer. Everybody laughed and smiled, their eyes soft, when the man called her 'mogatsaka' and lightly tapped her buttocks, and declared that she was as well endowed as a Mongwato queen. The man had an ingratiating manner, always smiling.

He wore black shiny trousers to match his black, shiny shoes, a beige cap and a clean and pressed golf shirt tucked precisely into his trousers.

They cheered when he picked her out from among all the other kids and asked her to dance. They sang and clapped their hands, and somebody beat out a drumbeat on a nearby upside-down oil drum.

'Stibiiiiii stibi ko-ko! Ee, koko!'

Unashamedly, she clicked her fingers rhythmically and moving her head from side to side, with her skirts tucked into her panties as if she had been playing batho-safe. And as the intricate movements of her feet came to a stop, he dug out a few toffees from the bottom of his pocket

and pressed them into her open hand, deliberately probing his thumb into the softness of her palm. This was their special little ritual, and she adored him. She loved his dark face so full of even white teeth that sparkled. She loved his luxuriant beard. But this day it changed. The man took her aside.

‘Do you want to see something special?’ The man asked, and she nodded, already opening the toffees he had given her, starting to chew one. Then he dug into his bulging pocket, pulling out a silvery chain with a small heart sparkling on it. Her eyes shone. They walked together. Her hand in his, smiling up at him because she loved him so.

He took her to the back, next to the smelly pit latrine where nobody hid even in the most competitive game of hide-and-seek. He unzipped his trousers, which dropped to rest around his ankles, exposing his bony legs. He pulled out his peeing thing, all soft and black and ugly.

His eyes shining, he whispered hoarsely, ‘Touch it!’

She looked up at him, in turn revolted and confused.

‘Touch it! Touch it!’ He whispered with urgency and she reached out a shaking hand and settled her fingers there, unsure about what to do.

‘Again!’ She touched it again and again, her heart beating so fast. He grabbed her hand and spat in it and slid her closed hand up and down his thing and it became hard, like wood. His eyes were closed; he didn’t seem to care about the putrid smell and the flies buzzing round them and the cockroaches crawling on the seat.

The man hitched up the skirt of her little yellow dress, yanked down the bewildered child’s panties and shoved himself inside her little body. Just like that. The pain split her into pieces. He held his hand over her mouth. She could not catch her breath. He was sweating. He wiped his sweaty hands on his trousers, and dug deep in his pockets to bring out more toffees.

And he placed the toffees in her cupped hands, pressing his thumb into the softness of her palms.

‘Don’t tell anybody. Don’t tell anybody about our special secret.’

She could not unwrap her toffees because she had touched his sticky thing with her hands, so she threw them down the pit latrine. She wiped away the blood that was running down her leg with the bottom of her dress. And she stayed cooped inside the pit latrine the whole day. She did not know how to explain the blood on her special independence-day dress.

Now when the man came to visit, Realeboga ran into her mother's bedroom and hid under the spare bed, feeling the coldness of the floor on her bare legs, hearing above her heartbeat the man shouting,

'Where is my little wife, o a ntshiela? Come on, I have your favourite toffees.'

And she would focus on the sight of the lumpy mattress cutting into the bedsprings until she imagined the springs were cutting into her legs.

* * *

Realeboga liked playing house. She shut her eyes tight to create darkness and waited for the girl-cockerel to crow ko-ko-ro-ko-roo the new day into being. Then she pretended to wake with a flourish, and proudly swept her yard, cooked the mud porridge and dished little drops of it into broken china plates, with mulberry tree leaves as the vegetables.

She arrived home happily, mildly distracted by memories of the afternoon. She came in through the door to her mother's kitchen. She saw her mother and her aunt sitting at the table. And she saw the dress. On the table. Sitting menacingly between them; its bright yellow accentuated by wide spots of dark brown. Realeboga remembered the dress. She had worn it for the first time during the previous year's independence celebrations. All the children had gone to the kgotla, and had sat in the sun listening to the big man from Gaborone reading a message from the Queen overseas. When the man finished they formed meandering queues to get a plate of white samp and seswaa and a glass of ginger-beer with cubes of pineapples thrown in. An older boy had nudged her elbow, and she'd spilt gingerbeer down the front of the dress, and she had walked home with the dress sticking to her tummy.

Six months later she wore the same dress. The time the man did the secret thing with her; there was the same dress that she had used to wipe the blood from her legs. The same dress that she had stuffed into the metal trunk that nobody ever opened, the same dress that now spread on top of the table between her mother and Aunt Phetso.

'*Aiee! Boloi! Witchcraft!*' her aunt exclaimed, wringing her hands and shaking her head, then folding her arms over her breasts. She leaned over the table towards Realeboga's mother, instinctively dropping her voice down to a whisper,

'Mma wena, things like this you should take to Mma-Patrick.'

* * *

Realeboga's heart was pounding as she walked into Mma-Patrick's yard. She could not believe that she was actually in the woman's yard. No children she knew came in here voluntarily. Mma-Patrick was a dark and chubby woman with a tinkly laugh and bulgy eyes that looked straight into your eyes to extract secrets hidden in there. But the kids were more afraid of the things that people said she did in the hut, situated in the rear of her large yard, and the strange noises that came from there.

Mma-Patrick was sitting under a large tree, with her legs outstretched, the colour of the bare soles of her feet in sharp contrast to the darkness of the skin of her legs. A green enamel bowl sat between her legs, with bushes of uprooted wild spinach beside her. She was plucking the edible leaves into the bowl, casually tossing the bare branches aside. She looked up as Realeboga and her mother walked in, and smiled revealing a wide gap between her front teeth.

'Ah, Mistress, Dumelang,' she said in a friendly voice.

'Dumelang. Le kae?' Realeboga's mother replied. The girl looked at her mother in surprise. Her mother hated it when people called her or any other female teachers Mistress, she never missed an opportunity to correct the speaker, but now she just smiled at the woman.

'Kagiso!' Mma-Patrick called in the direction of the main house in the middle of the yard, 'Tela Mistress setilo.'

'Owai, a chair is not important.'

A small boy, in dirty khaki shorts appeared carrying a striped canvas chair, and hesitated with it, seeing Realeboga's mother already sitting down. The little girl sat so close to her mother, she was almost hidden from the woman's view.

Her mother and Mma-Patrick talked about the heat, the sun and the lack of rains. They gossiped about the other teachers, and talked about Rra-Poroga's goats which broke into the school gardens and destroyed the Standard Seven's vegetable plots. Finally, Realeboga's mother said,

'We have come for help.'

'Ehe!' said the woman. She got up, little green leaves falling at her feet, her palms stained green with the juice from the spinach. 'Just wait here for me, Mistress.'

Realeboga and her mother waited without speaking, the little girl's heart pounding hard in her ears. Then she realised that it was not just

her heart, it was the sound of a drum coming from the hut at the back of the yard. Kagiso, the boy with the khaki shorts, came to get them and escort them into the hut.

The woman was sitting on a simple mat, wearing a white dress, with a full and pleated skirt that covered her feet even as she sat cross-legged. A yellow and purple knitted belt cut diagonally across her ample stomach, and she wore a white headscarf wrapped around her head, like a turban. She looked different from the woman who had thrown her head back to laugh, just minutes ago, outside in the yard.

Ku-dum, ku-dum, ku-dum went the drum, as it was beaten by a man at the back of the hut, as if keeping with the little girl's heart. The woman in the dress started to sing, and the mother joined in, clapping her hands. Suddenly the woman stopped singing, and eventually the mother also faltered and stopped altogether. It was just the drums then, and the little girl's heartbeat.

The woman started speaking; the words rolling from her mouth were just a million jumbled sentences, nothing the little girl could understand. Her face looked as if it was difficult for her to speak; her eyes were tightly closed and sweat was running down her dark face in shiny streams, and soaking into the whiteness of her dress. Her body jerked and swayed, until the man at the back of the house gradually reduced the loudness of the drums until he was tapping softly, softly, softly and stopped.

The little girl's heart beat fast, she stared at the woman, until the woman opened her eyes, dabbing daintily at the sweat on her face with a white handkerchief that appeared magically out of the recesses of her white dress. Looking calmly up at Realeboga's mother, she said,

'Mistress, I need to talk to you, take the girl outside.'

The sun outside was shining brightly; Kagiso, the little boy with the dirty khaki shorts was perched on the edge of a canvas chair, dipping his hands into half of a watermelon and emerging with a fistful of red flesh, the juices dripping and snaking down his arm.

'Do you want some?' The boy asked, and as Realeboga was about to plunge in, her mother jerked her up, hurting her arm and proceeded to march her home. Her mother was walking so fast that Realeboga had to jog behind her to keep up; she could not hear what she was mumbling so angrily about; all she could see was her hands moving to her face to

wipe away the tears flowing. Her mother never once turned back to look at her.

* * *

It was the coldness of the floor that made Realeboga recollect these memories. She shifted slightly under Leano's weight. He tried to move closer, but she shifted again. He sighed and asked, 'What?'

'Nothing,' she said, wishing they were in bed and she could at least cover her body with a blanket.

'Come on, baby,' he said, nibbling her earlobes. 'Come on, baby, let me have you.'

She was repulsed, and she shook her head.

'Okay,' Leano said, throwing himself on his back, and shivering as he felt the cold. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing,' she said.

He raised his eyebrows.

'Really, nothing. It's just, can we do this another time?'

'Why? Come on, baby, look at me.'

* * *

'Stop looking at the ground, look at me.'

Realeboga stood just a short distance from the guy. Her hands behind her back, drawing circles with her right shoe on the ground. The young man was sitting on the huge rock that was pushed against the mokoba tree. She knew that her classmates were standing at a safe distance, looking on with great interest to share titbits with friends in school the following day.

'Come on, look at me, baby. Tell me, what's your name?'

'Tebogo.' The name popped in to her head out of nowhere.

'Tebogo, what a pretty name, where do you live, Tebogo?'

She pointed vaguely in the direction of home.

'Who do you live with?'

'Mama and Grandma.'

He stood up and walked to her and touched her lightly on the shoulder.

'Ga o bate re ratana? Huh, don't be scared, look at me.'

‘No.’

‘Why not? We would have fun together if you were my girl. Tell me, who do you share your bedroom with?’

In an instant she realised what he was really asking for. Her heart was beating, she could feel it at her throat. He moved closer to her and caressed her hips lightly. She heard her friends tittering at their safe distance, and as he turned to glare at them they fled. He turned back to see silent tears running down Realeboga’s face.

‘Okay. Go. Go. I can see you are still a little girl.’ His voice was full of scorn. Her friends immediately assembled around, asking,

‘What did he say? What did he want?’

‘Nothing,’ she said.

But when she sat by herself, she wondered why the guy had chosen her out of all her friends. She wondered if there was some peculiar thing about her that made guys pick her from among all other girls. Every time a man looked at her, her heart beat faster and faster, and she held her breath waiting for him to do some other dirty thing to her.

* * *

The day she first saw Leano he was standing on stage, looking wiry and strong in a formal suit and tie, and an out-of-place looking red fez on his head. He scanned the crowd of students crammed into the Student Union hall, then removed the microphone from its stand,

‘Viva, student power, viva!’ he thundered.

‘Viva!’ The students rumbled back, she along with them, with no feelings of self-consciousness. It did not matter that the cause she was shouting for did not concern her. It did not matter that her roommate, Kebonye, had had to drag her to come to the rally.

Shouting for an increase in off-campus students’ allowances was way better than being cooped up in her dormitory room and finishing off her literature essay. As she stood perched precariously on the edge of a chair she shared with Kebonye, she was grateful she had convinced her to come to the rally. Here, pressed together so closely with other students, she did not feel quite so alone.

‘Viva!’

Rallies and strikes at the university were commonplace and the following day she was already on the brink of forgetting all about it. But

then a knock came at her door, and when she opened it, Leano stood at the door.

‘Sister, we need as many people to sign as we can get,’ he said, showing her three pages already full of hasty signatures. She examined the intricate details on his red fez, as he explained the petition.

‘The struggle needs your support,’ and she had to laugh at his earnestness. Lobbying for an increase in student allowances was hardly a struggle, she thought, but she invited him in.

‘What part of the country do you come from, sister?’ he began, and three hours passed before he left her room.

Her friends teased her about their relationship, and at first she protested, ‘We are just friends.’

At first she loved his strong hands and the way they punched and cut the air. She loved his courage; his ability to stand in front of a crowd of ruthless students and talk as casually as if he was talking with one friend. She loved the way his look held her with promises of never letting go. It was as if a light had been poured into her heart, freeing her to smile and laugh.

Then she learnt he needed her reassurance.

‘They are plotting against me,’ he would say about his colleagues in the Student Representative Union. Her oiled words were always ready.

‘They are just jealous of you,’ she massaged his ego.

‘They can’t do anything to you, you are too popular,’ she reassured him yet again.

But then he started feeling threatened by her friendships, even the one with her oldest friend in the university Kebonye. ‘That girl is a party animal, and she has a new boyfriend every other month. She is not a good influence on you,’ he would say. ‘I don’t want you going off with people I don’t trust.’

Her ready words failed to appease him; it was as if he doubted she had surrendered herself to him.

‘You are my woman!’ he would say, and she would close her eyes and grit her teeth, feeling her heart beating faster and faster, betraying the stony feeling that had settled into it as soon as his hands unzipped her jeans.

He would manoeuvre himself inside of her; her whole body would be like one big knot, and her heart would only stop beating like a drum in her ears when he had finished and kissed her on her forehead.

He would whip out her cell phone from her bag and scroll through her contacts and messages, asking for details of who everybody was and how she knew them.

‘You are mine! Only mine!’ he would say as he deleted names and numbers.

Before long her contact list had been whittled down to family members and a few classmates.

His paranoia spilt over to Realeboga, who started feeling his eyes everywhere, even in places she knew he couldn’t possibly be. She waited for him to spring up out of places to prove that he was right about her.

* * *

As she got up from the cold floor, Realeboga turned tentatively to him.

‘Leano, I think we should break up.’

‘What?’ He stumbled up, coming to her. ‘Why?’

‘I don’t think we are good for each other any more. We are just making each other miserable.’

‘No, Lebo,’ she winced at his pet name for her, ‘you make me very happy. You are happy too, aren’t you?’

She looked at the floor, her silence speaking volumes.

‘It’s that good-for-nothing friend of yours, isn’t it? She’s the one who told you to do this.’

‘Leano, please.’ How could she tell him? How could she let him know that her body, her whole life had been stolen from her by men, that she only wanted to reclaim it, to reclaim herself.

When he spoke his voice was calm and cold.

‘You are my woman, Lebo. If I can’t have you then nobody else will.’

Her heart was beating so fast that she could almost hear it above the din as Leano started ranting. She watched him, as if from a great distance, as he grabbed a knife from the counter. Then she felt the searing pain as the knife went into her chest, went out and in and out and in again. She felt her heart beating slower and slower and slower. She was only a bit confused by the calmness that she felt. And her heart lay still.

Every Picture Tells ...

Romaine Hill

Waking, Herold lay flat on the bed, his head on Lizzie's favourite silky mohair cushion. Out across the bay the Hottentots Holland mountains were etched clear against the dawn sky, red, tinged with gold, while the Helderberg, set at its particular angle, seemed to be moving slightly forward, seawards. 'Issit nie pragtig nie, H.G.?' she would have exclaimed. 'Kyk maar net. Just like a painting, but so much more majestic.'

'Damn woman,' he muttered. 'Damn dog. Damn them all,' and he rolled over and buried his face, but the mohair tickled him and the frame of his specs dug into his cheeks on either side of his nose and Shep, the German Shepherd, licked his ear and whimpered, ran to the door and then back to the bed. Jumping up, he pawed Herold in the back, whimpering again. He, too, was waiting for Lizzie. Rolling over and raising his voice, Herold said, 'Down, Boy, down now,' all the while patting the creature's head and rubbing his chest bone to soothe him. The both of them were suffering.

He adjusted the cushion under his head and lay looking at the bare frame, hooked still over the jagged-edged nail, where the painting had hung so triumphantly, complete at last. His latest sign to Elisabeth that she alone was his all. He had set her in stone, his beloved, painting her within a niche, with a small raised frame marking off the edge of the large, rectangular format. She herself rose from within the frame, fully flesh-and-blood, with her rising breasts, her shell-like nipples, her rounded belly and her long limbs reaching down from below the delectable triangle of russet hair to her long well-formed feet. Like Botticelli's Venus, she stood at the water's edge. Her exquisite flesh tones contrasted beautifully with the grey blue surround, while the greens and browns of the natural landscape were set against the rocks, as she stepped out from the shore and into the water lapping at her feet.

Lying there on their bed, he began to moan with the dog, as he gazed at this damaged portrait, now lying on the floor. How Herold had loved those days of sketching that were a prelude to this work that now lay ripped asunder and abandoned. He and Elisabeth had never felt more intimately bonded than in those months, as she sat or lay on the bed, sometimes reading, sometimes just standing there dreaming as she was wont, often, and with such enviable ease.

Then, a fine thread would snap: 'I'm cold, H.G., she would say. Bloody cold. This is inhuman. And I'm hungry. Don't you artists ever *feel anything*? Put on the kettle and pass me your Aran. H.G., can't you *hear me*?'

'Come on, Lizzie, just ten more minutes, please, I'm nearly there,' he would plead. 'Then I'll cook up something delicious, while you lie in the bath to warm up. I just need to finish the curve of your shoulder.' He knew that here, at last, was his true muse, the woman whom he could paint forever, live with forever. And the whole work was so very nearly resolved.

Then, overnight, she was gone. Her canvas bag packed, the blue Volksie revved outside in the street, sailing off down Main Road from Kalk Bay, winding along the sea front toward Muizenberg to take Baden Powell Drive to Stellenbosch and then onto the highway, over the great passes and up through the Karoo, to Colesburg, to be with her dying mother. He had tried to work on alone, to stay motivated, directed. Not to long for her so deeply that his painting faltered again and fell into nothingness. And the painting had held him. The spell of her rising from the canvas had kept him there, at it, for all of three weeks. He could draw his love, paint his love and lately she had taught him to speak his love, face to face, a thing he had never dared to do. But long distance he could not, neither on the phone, nor by mail – email didn't even come into it: 'Who'd clutch a mouse,' he'd been heard to say to his friend Giles, owner of the Kalk Bay Gallery, 'when you can hold a woman or a paintbrush in your hand?'

Lizzie phoned from Colesburg once only, early on, when Fay Elisabeth, her mother, went into the coma. She was distraught and Herold could not reach her, physically or emotionally; he felt the block of silence shifting in between them.

* * *

Her mother died three weeks to the day of her arriving back at the old family home, where the family had gathered. Her brother, Stephanus, the brother Herold had never met, had phoned to say their Ma had died, and the funeral was being held on the very next day, only the family were to be present. 'Nee,' he said, when Herold asked: 'But where's Lizzy? Can I speak to her, please?'

'Nee, Elisabeth says she can't talk on the phone, selfs nie met jou nie. She's gone for a walk.'

And when he'd phoned again two days later – he didn't want to trouble her, he respected her distress, so he'd waited – it was the same again: 'Sy kannie praat nie. Nee, she's really not ready to leave the family home yet.'

By the third attempt, Herold was desperate. 'Please, call Elisabeth, I want to hear her voice.'

The response was little different, though more sympathetically delivered, 'Baas H.G., be patient, I know Mies Lizzie, she'll go back when she's feeling better. Sy moet eers afskeid neem van haar mammie se gees wat nog hier is. She has to take leave first of her mammie's spirit. It's difficult you know, Mammie is everywhere, in everything she touched, everything around us. Wait a bit Basie, sy sal kom.'

So not one word from his beloved; only the knowledge that she would return when she was ready. But he needed something tangible to keep him from his own kind of dark despair; how could she forget how he needed her?

* * *

He didn't know how many days it was after she'd left that he started drinking again. Got out six of the bottles they had collected on various journeys out into the winelands, when he needed to distance himself from work or she longed for the land.

'H.G.,' she would say, entwining her arm in his, 'this False Bay is mos beautiful, and you have taught me to love it, despite myself, maar ek is 'n plaas meisie. Bugger the sea and the shore. Today I need to ride over the mountains to Robertson and Ashton. We can buy a bottle or two and eat out along the Breede. Stuck here at the shore's edge, only a

Portuguese explorer would feel happy. Me, I feel trapped.' So off they'd go, inland, journeying and wine tasting, and return, both refreshed by the day's adventure, with a bottle or two from one or other wine farm. Now the memory of it only made him more miserable.

He finished one bottle and then the second. Well into his fourth, he passed out on the mat where Shep lay, alerted by his strangeness. He woke the next day feeling sick as a dog – apologies to Shep, he thought, wincing. Only just managing to keep from vomiting all over their bed – Lizzie would kill him, if she knew – he swayed floorwards in the bathroom. Later, when he had eaten some well-done toast and a forced down a cup of black tea, he made a decision to call Giles. He would come up with something; they'd known each other from way back, met in first-year drawing.

'Shite, Grewar,' Giles said, 'by now you'd think you'd know. Your only therapy is what it's always been – artmaking – your curse and your salvation; it's never been any different with you, apart from Elisabeth, of course.'

Giles sent a model, to help Herold get back to life-drawing, take up the normality of daily work. Elke her name was. Not like Lizzie. Not warm, long-limbed, exquisite. But voluptuous in her own way, almost more forthcoming, chatty, and he found the companionable presence a comfort. Painting alone had made him feel like a man on a precipice, too near the edge. Or like someone on a rollercoaster.

* * *

Herold's dad had taken him and his sister, Marita, on such a ride once, when they'd gone up to the city for his mother to have treatment, when the cancer was first diagnosed. He had been terrified, every bit of the way, as they'd ascending the track of the mechanical monster, dropping down again and then jarring suddenly to a dead teeth-grinding halt. The other kids – it must have been school holidays – even the adults had screamed and shouted, but he had felt sick and clutched at his father, who had been irritable with him, had shut himself off almost, from both him and Marita that whole long, strange, hot day. And afterwards, the jarring, jolting movement had stayed in his body as they walked through the city streets, back to the hospital to fetch Mother. He wanted to tell her how he had hated it, the strange monster that made the gall rise in

his throat, the weird movement that propelled him still, but she was pale and silent, hushed him when he started to speak, and that only added to his deep anxiety.

The rollercoaster all over again, that was how painting was. So for sanity's sake, by day he drew the rounder, plumper body of this new woman, and in the late evening and by night he worked to complete the oil of Lizzie. When on the thirty-ninth day the rounded Elke had started crying, the tears welling slowly up in her eyes and spilling down her cheeks and over her breasts, he had taken her into his arms and moved with her to the bed, throwing the gathering sketches from its surface onto the floor, where others lay spread out across the length of his and Lizzie's room. He was tender with her, kind, she was so soft and puppyish, quite unsophisticated, and in need of comfort. After he climaxed, he'd held her and the two of them had fallen into a deep sleep. He was with Lizzie in his dream, walking, they'd come home, after fish and chips at Kalky's, were going to doss down and give themselves over to loving but they couldn't get in. Their door was locked, they had no key, she knocked, then he knocked, more loudly, banged with his fist.

It was this knocking that woke him with a start. Someone was actually banging loudly on the door, shouting, too, the words punctuated by Shep's jubilant barking: 'H.G., H.G., Goddamit, can't you open up, it's blowing a gale out here.' It was the fortieth day of his mistress's absence, and Shep, faithful creature, had waited, day upon day, for just this quick step coming up the path, this voice and this characteristic eruption into the room that only Lizzie was capable of. Frozen, Herold had stood there, in the midst of the night's chaos, sketches of Elke covering the floor, where he had placed them one by one to convince his latest model that her particular type of beauty was every bit as appealing as any other. The bed was rumpled, the mohair cushion and pillows strewn down beside and beneath it.

Hardly deigning to notice the hastily retreating Elke, Elisabeth was coming at him, throwing her haversack hard and then wildly lunging out with her elbows and her balled fists: 'Lizzie,' he said, 'Lizzie,' trying to reach her, but he had no wind left in him.

'You shit, Herold, You bastard. You're no different from the others, no better than any of them. Forty days you couldn't even wait for me, while I took proper leave of my mother. And there she was, saying with

almost her last breath, 'Go to him, Elisabeth, go, he's a good man, your real mate. One goes far to find a true mate, my Lizzie.'

Then lighting upon the sketches spread out over the floor, she gathered them up, and ripped them across, once, twice, three times, only the thickness of the paper stopping her. In her final burst of fury, she crossed the room to his prized canvas, hanging there triumphant on the wall, and wrenched it off the hook, ripping it diagonally as the nail pierced the cloth. A tear of four finger's width had appeared in the upper edge above the niche from which her beautiful, calmer self presided. When he heard the tearing canvas and saw the nail piercing the work he had so carefully nurtured into being, he snapped back into life, reacting for the first time to this whirling dervish who had burst into his sacred space, their sacred space, venting her loss, her pain and her fury. Lifting her up over his shoulder, he moved doorwards, out over the two steps, through the little gate and dumped her down, on the bonnet of her car.

'You bastard, bastard, H.G.,' she was bellowing all the while, still pounding his upper arm and his back with all the force she could muster.

Inside once more and breathing, 'In ..., out ..., in ..., out ..., in ... out', to calm himself, as she had taught him, he heard her blue Beetle start up followed by its deep-throated roar as it shot off down the road, God only knew where, but she wouldn't go far without Shep. Throughout their skirmishing, the dog had dashed in and out, in and out, jumping up and down, licking both of them, and barking sharp, little barks, as if to attract their attention, bring them to their senses, like the silly sheep they were. Then at last had retreated to his mat under the table and lay, whimpering intermittently, and flashing Herold with a mournful eye, as if he, too, held him responsible for the whole debacle.

* * *

That was seven nights ago. The first day, and deep into the night, he had been blind with indignation and fury. The second, he had cried for Lizzie, for Fay Elisabet, and for his own beloved mother, Gertrude. For her, his first love, he had cried as he had not cried when all those years ago they had stood, he and his sister, with his black-clad, unfamiliar father, their sombre grandfather and veiled grandmother, in their school uniforms – 'perfectly suitable for the occasion,' his grandmother had

said, when Marita had questioned her. 'No need to incur unnecessary expense on account of children' – something their mother would never even have thought. After that, grandmother's word became law in their house, which changed overnight, so he could hardly wait to get away to art school, to colour and warmth and camaraderie. Thank God for the drawing competition and his sharp memory of the rollercoaster ride and how greenly sick and at odds it had made him feel then and in all that painfully alone growing-up time that lay ahead.

So he lay and wept for all that was lost so irrevocably, and as he lay there on their bed, where a strong scent of Lizzie's fragrance still lingered, despite the weeks that stretched between and the brief moment of Elke's intrusion, it came to him that something as precious as the time he and Elisabeth had shared could not be irrevocably gone – they were still both alive, Goddamit! Something must be done to remedy the situation. And he leapt up, Shep noticing the shift, jumped up, too, licked him for encouragement. 'Come on, Herold,' Mother always used to say, when he stumbled in the yard or fell off his bike and grazed his knee, or his arithmetic mark was not good, 'a chap can always do something to make things right, let's see what we can do.' And they would sit on the mat or in her big chair and together find some solution for the problem in hand. How he'd longed for that later at high school, when his problems seemed only to multiply and she was so utterly gone from his world.

But now she seemed to be with him again, prompting him anew. And he moved to look at his finely drawn, beautifully evoked portrait of Elisabeth, fearful muse and dearly beloved. And as he saw the wooden frame and the rough nail poking through his canvas, he began to work rapidly and with all the pent up energy of the past few days. First, he painted, to the right of Lizzie on the finished canvas, a golden cupid, airborne, winged and smiling up at the face of the woman, looking down from above. In its chubby cupid hand, it held out a votive offering for the goddess: a choice, long-stemmed, pink rose, yet to open, Lizzie's favourite, a Queen Elizabeth.

Then, on the surface of the studio table, he began, on a long canvas strip, like a man in a fever, to paint four smaller companion works: first Elisabeth, head only, masked, double-visaged, like the famous portraits of Picasso's various women, her dark witch-aspect on the left, her beneficent, generous side on the right, one triangular and slightly at odds with the other. Looking harlequin-like, she had, pushed back

on her brow, an eye-mask, seductively flesh-pink in hue. Then he did a small head-and-shoulders portrait of himself, wearing a red pointed dunce's cap, and with a whimsical look on his face. Next, their two Volkswagens, hers blue and his a faded golden-brown, one behind the other, just the way it was the Saturday they first met when he had gone to deliver paintings to the Kalk Bay Gallery and she, returning from walking and bathing at Fish Hoek beach, had been distracted by the whine of the pup in the back of her car, and collected his Beetle from behind, smashing his right parking-light and denting his back mudguard. Eight years ago that collision had been – not their last either! But they had survived till now, till her distance and the terrifying shaft of silence and his ridiculous folly.

* * *

Please God, she would know what he was saying, would read into these texts he was painting what he wanted her to know, the tenderness and caring he wanted to remind her of. Reading and understanding this votive offering, she, he knew, must come home to him, to their bed, their life. Last he painted, like a faded sepia photograph, a sketch of Elke, fulsomely nude, attended by five fluttering cupids, but her neck and head he replaced with Elisabeth's, Elisabeth's blue-green eyes dominated the small canvas. Over Elke's body he placed a pall of shadow, while an incandescence flooded Lizzie's features.

'Sies, H.G.,' she would mock, 'what's this descent into pastiche?' But he knew she would be filled with wicked delight by the intellectual joke and the message of love it bore.

Her attempt at ripping the canvas from its frame became the beginning of the restorative act itself. Preserving the ten-centimetre tear at the upper edge, he loosened the canvas from its frame and laid it along the studio table. The oil sketches on the smaller formats had already dried in the warmth of the studio. He pasted now, midway along Lizzie's image and to the right, the almost photographic image of their Volksies colliding; to the left and slightly above, he placed the quizzical-looking H.G. himself, foolish, penitent, adoring. Below, at the feet of his muse, he put the oil sketch of Elke, now blurring into oblivion, as Lizzie smiled her secret smile. And, finally, over the beautiful head of the original, he tacked the two-sided, picasso-esque visage of the source of his inspiration

– femme fatale and fury – two-fold persona of his one and only woman. Casting his eyes quickly over the whole, he held it up to view, then signed it below, and he couldn't help the flourish: 'H. Grewar'. He looked up to see the sun rising once more out over the bay. Morning – exactly the right time to find her.

'Look, Shep, look,' he said, showing the dog, 'Won't Lizzie like it? She'll come home now, don't you think?' – this last appeal addressed to the animal already frisking at the door, just at the mention of Lizzie's name. Herold rolled the composite canvas adeptly, securing it with the wide cerise scarf from Lizzie's cupboard, that toned with the pink eye-mask and the dunce's cap, took Shep's lead off the hook, fixed it to his collar, and, as they moved out through the door, banged it behind them.

'Find her, Shep boy, find Lizzie,' he said, rubbing the dog's ears and thumping him warmly on the rump. Shep, Herold knew, would find his mistress, bring her back home. All he had to do was follow, bearing his gift with its message encoded for one reader, one viewer only. Shep wagged his tail and set off at a dash, along the sidewalk to Fish Hoek, where daily the three of them had walked and swum together and where, he knew, as Herold knew, she would take to the waters for comfort and healing.

'It's like a return to the womb,' she would say, 'water – so eternally renewing. I'm so glad I don't have to choose between earth and water.' So, cradling the painting in the crook of his arm, like a rolled carpet – a magic one, he hoped – he strode out, in the wake of the dog, to find her.

To Own a Bed

Sylvia Schlettwein

He was good-looking in a sly, cruel, smarmy salesman sort of way, with his dark hair smothered in hairdressing cream. The way his shiny curls clung to his forehead and scalp disgusted her. At the same time she felt a perverse desire to run her fingers through his hair, to feel and taste the stickiness of him. *Desmond*, she read on the name tag on display on his maroon collar of the shirt with the logo *Mr Furniture* embroidered on the breast pocket.

Her father had always warned her about colored men: 'Since they are neither black nor white, they think they can have the best of both worlds, and have the women of both worlds, too.' That was what her father had said, or something along those lines at least.

She was pretty, thought Desmond. Prettier than most of the Windhoek women. With smooth, very dark skin, brown eyes, white even teeth, full lips, her hair extended by plastic braids. Most probably a domestic worker, judging by the plain dress, chipped nail varnish and flat shoes. The minute Desmond saw her, the way the newly braided extensions pulled at her forehead made him want to yank her head back and nibble at the smooth skin of her slender neck. He'd seen the same look in a woman's eyes before, and he saw it now, the way this one looked at the bed with longing, biting her lip she wanted it so badly.

'So, I see you like this bed. It's lekker, isn't it?

'Yes, but it is too much for me, 2000 dollars.'

'That's not really a problem,' he explained. 'You can pay the 1 999 dollars off in twelve monthly instalments of 299 dollars. Bring me your last three pay slips and we'll sign the papers.'

'I don't get pay slips and 299 dollars a month is too much for me.'

‘Okay,’ he shrugged, ‘just remember, you’re not the only one that likes this bed. But tell you what, I’ll keep it for you until the end of the week because I like you. You must make plan for Friday, nè?’

She hated how he spoke to her, in the way of some colored and white people, trying to imitate the way he thought she probably spoke. That was one of the things she appreciated about Madam Schmitt who just spoke Afrikaans or English to her like she did with everybody else. Yes, that was what she would do, she would ask Madam for a loan.

What she didn’t like about Madam Schmitt was how she always took at least ten minutes to explain various facts of life to her, beginning each sentence with ‘You see, Amelia ...’ and then ending off with ‘..., you understand?’

‘You see, Amelia, just because you like that bed at Mr Furniture, doesn’t mean you can have it. I can’t have everything I want, either, especially if I can’t pay for it. Why don’t you save some money and then get a bed you can actually afford? In any case, these people are trying to rob you, with small-print contracts and high interest rates, you understand? No, I can’t give you the money, I’m sorry. It doesn’t feel right.’

Heike Schmitt knew they could afford to give Amelia the 2000 dollars and let her pay it off, but it was true, it didn’t feel right. Amelia had to learn to save and manage her own money, didn’t she? And surely there were more important things to get than a bed! And where did Amelia want to put the thing? A double bed! With a base! She lived in a shack, for God’s sake! No, she wouldn’t even bother to mention this latest request to Arnold. Not that she felt the need to take decisions with Arnold any longer, about anything really. She was accustomed to running her part of the relationship, the marriage, the household. And Arnold did what he had to.

Thinking of beds, she’d long thought of trading their double bed for twin separates. Arnold wouldn’t complain. As long as he didn’t have to deal with Amelia, or any other issue of domesticity for that matter. What would there be to complain about anyway? It wasn’t as if there was anything worth mentioning going on in that bed anymore. Did she miss it? That was not the right question. Did she care? That was the right question and the answer was no. Did he care? She didn’t

know. Memories of doing IT on couches and the kitchen table and the bathroom floor and even once on the back seat of a car had long since faded. When it came to the bedroom, the bleak pleasure of acquiring a Sealy Posturepedic mattress and the latest in bed linen was as good as it got lately. Anyway, her decision to refuse such a hefty loan to Amelia was purely based on what was best for Amelia.

* * *

Amelia went back on Thursday. The bed was still there. King size, bigger than anything she had slept on in her life, the sign above the bed inviting her to have *Sweet Dreams for a Snuggly N\$ 1 999*. If she bought it, for once Richard wouldn't complain about her being away all day, leaving him to look after the children and doing other women's work. He wouldn't ask her for money and leave for his nightly jaunt. No, the day she imagined leading him into the shack, her hands over his eyes to keep him from seeing the purchase too early, lifting them suddenly and crying 'Surprise!', he would hug her, look deep into her eyes and say,

'I love you. Thank you. A proper bed. This is a dream come true!'

And he would make love to her on the new bed, tenderly, like he had never done before. A changed person, and lover, transformed by the proof of her caring.

She jumped at the unexpected touch of a hand on her shoulder, and the voice in her ear. As she turned around she knew exactly whose face to expect. She had instantly recognized the smell of his hair cream, felt how he tugged at her braids, twisting them around his fingers, his breath too close and too hot in her neck for comfort.

Desmond grinned.

'You made a plan? I kept the bed like I promised. It wasn't easy. There are lots of people that are interested and of this model it's the last in stock. So you mustn't disappoint me. I really kept it specially for you.'

She forced a smile and shook her head. 'Can't I have a lower rate and pay off longer?'

'No, I can't do that, but if you come tomorrow after half past five, then maybe I can help.'

He stretched out his hand towards her face and ran the back of his index finger over her cheek, then he got hold of one of the plastic braids and tweaked at it. She had to look him in the face.

‘Yes,’ she heard herself saying. ‘I will come tomorrow.’

‘Okay. See you then.’ He ran the hand that had touched her face, just a few seconds ago, through his hair and smiled his salesman smile.

She would not come tomorrow. No, she was a decent woman. Not like her sister Augusta who heaped shame on the family by sleeping with men for cell phones and nice clothes and jewellery. Even if Augusta kept saying it was not prostitution.

‘I give services in exchange for favours. What is wrong with that? It is work, after all!’

And what if Richard found out? No, Amelia couldn’t risk that.

Oh, but to sleep on a bed like Madam Schmitt’s! To go to rest in luxury and to wake up in it. To own softness and sophistication. To move away from the baseness and contourlessness of a mattress on the floor to the dignity and defined shape of a raised bed. Maybe she would come back tomorrow. Who would know? Just this once? No. She would come before half past five and try once more to get a lower rate and a longer pay-off period. She would talk to another salesman, not Desmond.

Madam Schmitt pursed her lips and lifted her eyebrows when Amelia asked whether she could leave half an hour earlier, but as usual, said ‘Go, go!’ giving her permission with a half-irritated, half-generous wave of the hand. When Amelia stepped into Mr Furniture she was nervous, but could see Desmond nowhere. She walked quickly to the bed, stroked it, felt the longing like she had never felt before.

‘Aren’t you working today?’

The slightly husky female voice was all too familiar, in the true sense of the word.

‘Augusta.’ Amelia turned around. ‘What are you doing here?’

She was wearing a new outfit. Everything was too tight and too bright, as usual. Breasts nearly popping out of a glittery pink spaghetti-strap top, tummy flab spilling over the rim of bright yellow skinny jeans, heavy feet squashed into pink plastic pumps, matching pink lipstick, eyes made up heavily with blue eye shadow and lumpy mascara.

‘I told you about this coloured guy I’m seeing. He works here.’

She smiled and waved as Desmond made his way up to them.

'Hi, baby, I'm still busy here. Let's meet later at the usual place, okay?' he said to Augusta, placing his hand on her bottom, squeezing. 'You know each other?' He looked from one woman to the other.

'Yes, this is my sister Amelia.'

'It's a small world, nè?' He flashed a smile and winked at Amelia conspiratorially. 'She wants to buy this bed,' he explained to Augusta.

'Good luck then,' she scowled. 'She has no money.' Augusta made a point of shaking her breasts as she laughed at her joke which wasn't a joke.

'I'll check you out later,' said Desmond to Augusta, as he turned to Amelia.

All wiggling bum and swaying hips, Augusta made her way out, pouting at Desmond over her shoulder.

'You, baby,' Desmond said to Amelia, 'are early.'

'Yes, I wanted to ask about the installments again. Can you really not make the rate a little lower? And I will pay for longer?'

'I told you that's not possible,' he spread his hands. 'Company policy. I don't make the rules around here.'

Maybe there were things in life that felt so right that one had to do something that felt really wrong in order to get that right thing.

It was over much quicker than she thought it would be.

Except for the nauseating smell of the hairdressing cream and the greasy feeling of it on her neck, her breasts, even the stickiness on the inside of her thighs, it hadn't been that different from sleeping with Richard, except that Richard refused to use condoms.

But all of that would change soon. No one could possibly resist the invitation of tenderness a new, soft bed extended. Nine times she would still have to pay Desmond in this room in the backyard of Mr Furniture, but that seemed acceptable in the light of how quick it had been today, she thought, watching Desmond zip up his polyester pants and smooth his hair. And Desmond had promised to deliver the bed once she had paid the thousand dollars and that she would have by Monday. Tomorrow was payday. Five hundred dollars. And she'd ask Madam Schmitt for five hundred. Madam would rather loan her the reduced sum than go through the tedious lecture explaining about what

was really necessary and affordable in life. That much Amelia knew from previous experience.

* * *

The children were in bed. Heike Schmitt was about to retire herself, with a glossy magazine, nothing too strenuous an exercise for this time of day, when Arnold unexpectedly asked, 'Heike, can we talk?'

'Of course we can.'

They had stopped having evening conversations about six months after they had stopped having sex. So, what did he want of her this evening? He didn't even bother to prepare her. He just blurted out, 'I've met someone else.'

She and the kids would still be looked after, wouldn't they? She was slightly ashamed of her reaction, but she had to admit that it was actually a relief to feel the guilt lift, of her feelings of indifference to her husband. She couldn't even get herself to say something like, 'How can you do this to me,' or 'Am I the last to know?' or even 'So, what does she have that I don't?'

She had no desire to discuss Arnold's feelings, or the other woman (or maybe the other man, you never knew these days) or herself or their relationship or even the kids. She could not explain why, but all she could think was that Amelia would certainly get her bed now.

* * *

Amelia was in a state of nervous but happy anticipation. Desmond had delivered the bed as promised and had immediately claimed one of his nine outstanding installments in kind. Eight to go. She could never get used to this as Augusta had, but when she looked at the bed she knew that it was all worth it. To come home to comfort after a day of maintaining the luxury of others! She would be untouchable in her bed, oblivious to the pang of daily humiliations felt every time she smoothed the creases left by the sleeping bodies of Mr and Mrs Schmitt, from the crumpled sheets.

She could not wait for Richard to come home any minute from his rounds through the neighbourhood, trying to talk people into one of his 'deals'. And this time he wouldn't leave after taking the money for his evening jaunt at the shebeen.

She closed the door of the shack so that the bed would not be visible from outside. Just in time! There was Richard approaching through the early evening, dust settling behind him as he walked.

When he stood in front of her, she smiled and said, 'Close your eyes. I have something to show you.' She put her hands over his eyes for extra coverage and led him into the shack.

'Surprise!' she cried out and removed her hands, waiting for his gasps of excitement.

'So Augusta was telling the truth. You slut!'

The heavy blows of his fists to her head and forehead were strangely painless. Before everything went dark, Amelia felt her body give in under her, but that was no problem because she was caught by the comfort of her bed.

* * *

'Well, I guess we could start by sleeping in separate beds,' was the only thing Heike Schmitt could find to say to her husband. 'Come to think of it, Amelia has asked for a loan to buy herself a bed, so we could sell her ours, couldn't we?' Her words sounded absurd to her, almost as if she was repeating them from a script, but Arnold seemed to make sense of them.

'Let's just give it to her.' He slowly nodded his head, and mumbled, 'At least I can still make one person in this household happy.'

A Requiem for Daniel

Luso Katali Mnthali

Daniel will die when he is thirty-nine years old. In the months leading up to his death, Sophie visits a psychic for the second time, a medium for the first time, and uses a Ouija board for the third time in her life. Not taking chances she also asks old man Chao to tell her fortune by reading tea leaves and also looking at her palm. Being interlinked with hers, Daniel's fortune is also mentioned. It is always the same. The psychic tells Sophie again what she told her the first time: That she sees loss, great loss is to come. But this second time she says there is something else she can foresee. She says she senses a great love in Sophie. It has always been inside her, she says, but now it will grow even stronger. Sophie walks away from the psychic's rooms with a heart that refuses to lighten. The weather cooperates with her mood. Always grey, always rainy.

Because she works from home, she feels the moods and changes in the air more acutely than someone stuck in an airless, sunless office all day. Sophie has time to absorb the fact that Daniel will leave her, and that she must prepare for his absence. She cannot tell him, and he cannot know, or he will spend this time fighting against what is inevitable. The thing she has control over is how she spends her time with him. The remaining time. It is a numbers' game, she tells herself. He is thirty-nine: a multiple of thirteen. They live at number 31 Hill's Regent Road. She is thirty-one years old. She doesn't know what real significance these two numbers have except they are the inverse of thirteen, which for her denotes bad luck. When she was thirteen her youngest sister died in a car accident, and thirteen years later, Sophie met Daniel. Okay that's not bad luck meeting the love of your life. They were introduced by Daniel's friend Cara. Cara had met Sophie at the gym and suggested they meet up for drinks. A few weeks and a firm friendship later, Sophie met Daniel. Sophie's youngest sister was called Cara.

Sophie spends her days writing, or reading. Always the phone calls to publishers or agents. Daniel tells her constantly that she is talented and one day something will come of it. She tries to believe him. On weekends, he goes to play football with the kids at the centre, while she visits friends, shops, or works on her stories. He takes walks on the beach and sometimes takes her with him on his favourite hikes. They call the evenings DSO – Daniel and Sophie Only. They stay in, cook together, or order take-out from their favourite Indian restaurant. They watch Wes Anderson movies, because that's his favourite director. Sometimes he relents and they rent a romantic comedy. They cuddle up on their large red sofa, in front of the quaint little fireplace in a corner of the living room. They are happy not to go anywhere or do anything, unlike during the week when Daniel's work requires both of them to socialize. These moments at home are special to them both. They always were, but now, they seem to take on a different hue. Their time together might once have been sky blue, but now it is indigo.

Sometimes Daniel looks at Sophie quizzically, as if not quite understanding why she won't disagree with him as much, or why she'll concede a point when he knows her argumentative nature. Sometimes he's surprised at the intensity of her lovemaking. He doesn't complain, but he realises there's been an axial shift along the way. He puts it down to a comfort level that is only achieved after almost five years together. He's never been one to look at signs or oddities in places they shouldn't be. He's a facts kind of guy. He believes in the real and scientifically explainable, not the unseen and unexplained. He notices how fixed her gaze has become, how it is almost sad, trying to read something in him he knows nothing about. He knows, however, that the men in her stories are almost always based on him. His short, thick, no-nonsense hair becomes 'his long flowing raven locks' and his green eyes 'smoulder like a fire in the hearth.'. The shape of his lips, the slight indentation in his chin, the small overlap in his front teeth – they all make it as part of descriptions of her fictional heroes. He teases her that when she wants him to debut a certain position in bed, he merely has to read her latest story. One time he had to ask her to change 'a scoundrel's' preferred sexual position as they had discovered it was the one they liked best, and it seemed like giving away too much of themselves. She had been pleased by this, not annoyed.

'I'll just say he prefers his women on top. How about that?'

'Yeah, right. You love letting it all hang out. Every moan, sigh, groan and stroke. If I didn't know any better I'd say you'll try to venture into erotica at some point.'

'Only if it involves tall, dark-haired, muscular but lean young men who fulfil our heroine's every desire.'

'Is that a fact?'

'Yep, that's a fact.'

* * *

There has always been the understanding between them that he plays the straight man to her slightly oddball character. He is the Hardy to her Laurel. She dreams, he sleeps, and in the morning they pair up to complement the other's space. Where she is messy, he is neat. While she likes bright colours, he likes blues, greys and other metal tones. They're both stylish, and love a good sartorial conversation with their respective friends. They think of themselves as a modern couple, hip and to a certain extent refined, but it's understood that Sophie has the gypsy heart. She may refuse to dress like one, but she is an old soul. One night she says:

'Danny, didn't you always feel you'd meet me one day? I'm not saying I'm your one true love forever, but didn't you have this gut feeling that I'd come calling for you one day?'

'No. And you didn't come round calling, Cara introduced us. Why do you talk like you're in the eighteenth century sometimes?'

'Because you like that about me. And besides, most of my characters fall in love with swarthy buccaneers who own land and slaves across the Caribbean. Or they are gypsy women who fall for the young rakes who run away from their lives as landed gentry. This current one, however, is a buccaneer.'

'Let me guess: the buccaneer meets her on one of his ships when, disguised as a boy, they find her in the hold and they make her work for her keep. But when she falls off the mast or those rope thingies that they like swinging on in those pirate movies, her cap is lost and all her glorious long black hair swings about her and he cannot mistake that she is all woman. He had suspected that hint of a curve underneath the boy's clothes, but he stopped wondering because it was unseemly. Am I right so far?'

Sophie sits on their bed looking up at him as he undresses. She has her laptop beside her and looking through *The Captain's Captive* she can't fault him for understanding her writing and her genre very well. It's not difficult, sure, but she also appreciates that his humour forces her to make fresh changes.

'Danny?'

'Yes?'

'Can we stop talking and make twenty-first century love?'

'Yes m'dear. Anything for me lady. Your command is my every wish. Now take off your scantily clads and show us your titties!'

'Oh, my lord, but you do say the naughtiest things.'

* * *

In the cool green light of morning, it is clear to Sophie that some things have to change. They have always slept with one duvet and a bed sheet, relying on body heat to keep warm. But as the winter wears on, she brings in an additional blanket, a hot water bottle, a little fan heater and extra pillows. Daniel kicks up a protest.

'Isn't that a bit middle-aged, a hot water bottle? Aren't I enough?'

'Danny, if you hadn't bought us this draughty old house we wouldn't need all these old-fashioned items to keep ourselves warm. What happened to under-floor heating, air conditioning, and maybe even a fireplace in every room?'

'You are old-fashioned for sure, and very environmentally unfriendly. Do you know how high energy costs are at the moment? Except for the under-floor heating everything you've suggested is tantamount to actively destroying the environment.'

'Blah blah blah, all I know is what I feel. And I feel cold most of the time.'

'But sweetheart I'm here to keep you warm. I'm not going anywhere.'

She doesn't say anything at this point. Her big eyes and heart-shaped face look up at him. She feels lost and small in their big bed.

'I know you're not going anywhere, baby, and neither am I. But you do go out to work five days a week and I feel the cold deep in my bones.'

‘Being cold means we can heat things up nicely. And I know you. You’re happiest scribbling away, or tapping on your lap top. At least the study’s small and the heater works just fine.’

As he pulls her down on the bed, runs his hand down her back, Sophie considers how lucky she is. Daniel is kind, good-looking, smart in a no-nonsense way, and best of all, she feels, different but the same. She loves that he is so thoughtful, and respects who she is. Holding onto him, she tries to absorb his strength. It is at this point that she makes a promise to him. She will give in to him more. She will love him more, if that is possible.

That night she goes all out and cooks his favourite dish. Just to emphasize that she loves him and she will do even this – an activity she has little patience for – for him. His handsome face reflects his surprise as she unveils her creation. As he tucks into his eggplant Parmesan, she says with a cheeky smile ‘Now don’t go thinking I’ve changed my mind about marrying you. I will not become a hausfrau, baby.’

‘Well we’re as good as married, babe. I understand why you keep saying no, but I hope to wear you down one day. But you’re my wife in every way, don’t forget that.’

A shadow crosses her face, and inwardly she agrees.

* * *

A month before he is to die, she decides she can’t idly sit back and let the fates have their way. She has to do something to prevent him from dying. She is only thirty-one years old. She can’t lose the love of her life. They can still get married, have a baby. Be a family. But she knows she can’t change a single thing. She hates what is to happen, but she understands. She knows she’s being punished. She’s always known it would come to this.

Meanwhile Daniel can’t quite fathom why she’s changing in front of his eyes. He thinks perhaps she’s cheating on him. She’s much nicer to him, less argumentative, and constantly going out. She says it’s with friends. He doesn’t believe her. Daniel questions her several times about why she doesn’t complain as much as she used to.

After this she kicks up her game. She picks fights at just the right points, and tries to subdue her passion for him, but finds it only grows as the days go by. When he sleeps she looks at him with a hunger she didn’t

know she could have ever felt. She imprints his image on her mind, heart and in her very being. One morning he catches her sniffing at his neck. 'That's pretty gross you know ... unwashed man neck?' She smiles sadly at him.

'I love you,' she tells him, 'and I always will.' He frowns, puts it down to her current strange behaviour, but decides not to pursue it. He has a lovely day planned for them.

'I love you too, Sophie. And I, also, always will.' Pulling her into his arms he hugs her and holds her for a long time, unaware that she has tears in her eyes. They later head to the park and he brings along a picnic basket filled with goodies. He feeds her, spoils her and simply loves her. She seems much revived from the scary, sad woman he'd witnessed her become in the morning. They go to an art exhibition in the afternoon, and talk and laugh as they always have. Then they meet some friends for drinks and a small bite to eat. He looks at her sometimes when she's not aware, and sums up that she is fine, and that she's the same Sophie that he fell in love with all those years ago.

She thinks, Can being myself be so difficult? I never thought I'd see the day I would have to deceive this man. Yet she plays the part to perfection.

Away from his eyes, she is angry every day. She finds herself shaking an invisible fist at God and the universe, at the ephemeral nature of her happiness with Daniel. She knows others have been through the same thing she is now facing, but knows she can't talk to anyone close to her. They would not only think she needs professional help, but would also ruin the last days. She has very little time, and she is greedy with it. She makes up any excuse to be with him, and monopolises his time. Yet she makes sure he sees his family. His friends also come to the house more often, and some give her strange looks when she is more friendly than usual. In the past Daniel has told them she is shy. But lately the shyness has slipped away, or so it seems.

* * *

One morning he catches her sobbing softly.

'Hey, what's up?'

She jumps, unaware he had woken up. She had been so caught up, wrapped in a future without him. Sophie is trying so hard to remember

him, although he is right there beside her, lying in the bed they'd bought two summers ago, after he complained incessantly about his back. The old one was given to charity and they'd christened the new one over and over. This one became the bed they'd fought in, kissed and made up in. Made plans in. Simply relaxed in, which he liked to call decompressing. They'd listened to John Lennon's 'Woman' in this bed. At first she'd dressed the bed in a Helene Tisdale designer floral duvet but had had to undress it because he could not sleep in anything so girly. Now looking at his muscled and toned, radiantly glowing body, she laughs at the memory. How could she have expected such a virile man to sleep in that chintzy concoction she had dreamed up in a moment of Victorian madness? Wiping her tears away, she starts to laugh.

'Hey ... I know I usually wake up with something much bigger but that's no reason to laugh at a poor sleeping man ...'

She swats him on his bare stomach, which is deliciously warm to the touch. Her smile instantly fades. Warmth. Life. How could she believe that some day, soon, this would no longer be the case? She makes a decision. She will consult someone one last time. This time it will be a sangoma. She will have bones read. Sophie decides that they are closer to life than any board, or tea leaves, or crystal ball.

'Baby what's with you? You're unbelievably mercurial these days. What's been bothering you?'

Smiling at his sleep-soaked face, she tells him she is all right. Once again, he doesn't believe her.

'What are you up to today? Anything special planned?'

She senses that this is not a casual question. Twice he'd found her in the study while she was on the phone and quickly cut her call. The second time, he must have heard her say, 'see you Saturday' right before she hung up.

Now, looking at him in their bed, she sees that she has no choice but to deceive him.

'I'm off to see a friend.'

'Which friend?'

'Oh you don't know her. I met her at the gym.'

'Really?'

'Yes really. Now D baby, what is it that you're doing? Are you interrogating me?'

Daniel rolls closer to her, cradles his head in his hand, and looks at her as if trying to read her mind. The sage green cotton sheet around his waist and matching pillow under his arm frame him. She is still trying to remember him. It used to be quite difficult to just think of him and see his handsome face, but it's no longer that way. With practice, she succeeded, because his features now materialize easily.

'No I'm not interrogating you. I just like to know where my wife is now and then, where she goes ... and with who.'

'It's with whom, not who.'

He rolls his eyes, smiling. He grabs her wrist. 'You didn't say anything about the fact that I called you wife. You usually kick up a protest by now.'

'I'm getting too old for that shit now. And besides who ever heard of a romance writer so allergic to marriage? In fact ...'

She pauses for effect, while covering him with as much of her body as she can.

'In fact ... what ...?'

His face is lit up. She knows she makes him happy.

'In fact I think we should get married. Why not?'

'What?'

'Well my honey and my love. I think we should get married. I'm not as opposed to it as I once was. You know what? You grow up and think perhaps it's a mistake to be so rigid. I know my parents didn't stay together, but that's not us. Your mouth is still open sweetheart. You're supposed to tell me you love me and want to be with me forever. In fact, you're supposed to be overjoyed.'

'You're so contrary, my love. But it's one of the things I like about you. Love in fact. I'm just in shock that you finally said yes. I am overjoyed and I will marry you, just as soon as I make more love to you and make the arrangements while you go see your 'friend'. I don't want him to think that your bare finger means he can somehow take you from me.'

How completely ironic, she thinks, that it had to take impending death to make her say yes to the man she loves.

To be fair, she tells herself, we all know we're going to die, and some of us make peace with it. But how do you keep something like this from the man you claim to love? He can't know, doesn't know and shouldn't know that his time is near.

* * *

That Saturday afternoon Sophie puts on her red pea coat and straight leg jeans. She wears flat black boots. There is a light drizzle as she catches a taxi. She asks a passenger how to get to Khayelitsha. They give her directions, and she then realises what a chore it is for people to get around. At the terminus she takes the train to the township. On the long train journey there she falls asleep, then wakes very quickly afterwards because she feels a bit frightened. Not because she's never been to the township before, but because she's scared of what she will hear from the sangoma. Her future did not show that something dangerous would happen to her. But what is danger? If she loses her soul mate, that will harm her more than anything ever could. This is the assertion she makes as she gazes out onto the houses the train passes. She doesn't know how she will live without him. She's been so busy planning each day with him, loving him more and more, so how will she live without him? She smiles as she realises she's loving more of him. He's gained a bit of weight since she started to cook more.

As the train rumbles to a halt, she wakes out of her reverie. Rubbing her eyes, she looks about her. Crumbling buildings, people everywhere, and shacks. Many shacks, built hither and thither with no real planning. How do people live like this? She pays and thanks the driver after he tells her in a conspiratorial way she can ask anyone for 'Mrs Rabositsana'. Even in her limited understanding of indigenous languages, she laughs at the highly made up name. It is a signpost, she believes, allowing people to seek the woman's help without being looked at askance. She was told by her charwoman that this name was made up, and not the sangoma's birth name. It was Margaret who inspired the idea of going to a sangoma, after Sophie had asked her if she ever went to see witchdoctors. Having once taken a course in Northern Sotho, Sophie thinks the name sounds more like a Northern Sotho name. She shrugs. What does she know? Only that she should quickly find this woman, and get answers. Margaret had assured her that she would not be harmed and once she said this name, things would happen.

'Margaret, what do you mean things will happen?'

'Missie, you will see. You will see once you say this name.'

As she looks around for people who might help her find 'Mrs Rabositsana', she feels calm and unafraid for her own safety. Most people look at her with suspicion but just go on about their business.

Some people she asks are surprised and don't want to direct her. She doesn't know why, but some are uncomfortable about the sangoma. She believes it is for a religious reason. She almost gives up finding 'Mrs Rabositsana' until she reads two stickers on the back of a passing taxi. She makes out the words quite easily because the taxi isn't bent hell for leather, trying to kill people with its speed – it has to make its way slowly on one part of the makeshift road she walks on. 'Never Asleep', 'God loves you and so do I'. She doesn't question the incongruence of the messages. She reads into them the signs she wants to and is encouraged. Having asked three men and four women, she finally gets an address of sorts. This alley and down that street. Turn past that spaza shop, go left. That blue shack and that yellow house later, she is in front of the green door of 'Mrs Rabositsana'. After a short knock, the door opens. A woman with a friendly face ushers her in.

'A white girl here? Must be big problem.'

The woman has on a floral dress. She is large, in a mama kind of way. She has a similar build to Margaret. The large backside, heaving chest and strong-looking, capable hands are almost a cliché of black womanhood. Sophie soon begins to think there is nothing typical about being a sangoma. The woman came highly recommended by Margaret, who believes herself to be a God-fearing woman. Margaret also warned that most sangomas in the townships just want to make a quick buck. They have a booming trade with the criminals. So Missie 'shouldn't go to just anyone.'

The woman doesn't stop smiling. Sophie is not intimidated, just curious. She sits on one of her chairs. Old, most likely cast offs. 'Mrs Rabositsana' doesn't seem to be swimming in money. But from what she can tell her home is clean. There are pictures on the walls, of people and places. Maybe this is where the respect comes from. Why Margaret recommended her. 'You're wondering why I don't have nice things?

Sophie is startled, and reddens instantly.

'Not to worry. Many people surprise. So why are you here? A big problem?'

'Yes Mrs ...'

'Name not so important. What I do, it's important for people. Now give me your hands.'

Sophie looks up at the woman, and stretches out her hands. The other woman grabs them, and Sophie feels she is right. There is a sense of composure in the feel of the older woman's grasp. A rightness. The sangoma then leaves the room. Sophie hears a soft clutter, and a humming. She then thinks of Daniel. The day is getting closer. The other woman comes back and pulls a metal folding chair close to and in front of the maroon armchair Sophie is sitting in.

'Tell me more about him.'

Sophie pours out her heart. All the things she has been scared to tell another soul. Even the psychic who told her what was to happen did not get any words out of Sophie. She had been mute about it. Now the purge seems the sensible thing to do, especially to this woman, who seems more earth mother and healer than sangoma. In Sophie's own circle beliefs that a sangomas are 'witches' who dabble in 'black magic' and 'muti' are common, and Sophie understands now that it is not only whites who have this negative view.

She sits there, talking. Crying, being comforted. The older woman has both her hands in her own, stroking the back of Sophie's every so often. When she can say no more to this person who is no longer a stranger or even strange to her, Sophie stops. She looks across the room to a Jesus figurine on the wall.

'Yes I believe in Jesu.'

'How can you?'

'Too complicated for now. We are not all the same. Just as I know your love is not the same as others. Coming here to save this man. He is already saved!'

Sophie visibly struggles with this information.

'He was never going to die. Not yet. After much time. You just want to punish yourself. You tell me of your sister. You survive and she does not. She dies in that accident. So you punish yourself to think Daniel die. Someone else leave you. Instead of enjoying his life, you think he will die. That is not joy. Not happiness. Go home now. There are no bones to read. Read your heart.'

* * *

Sophie goes home in a daze. When she walks into the house it is warm. But Daniel doesn't answer when she calls. She doesn't feel his presence. She panics, running up to their bedroom. She opens the door thinking maybe he has gone out. But there he is in bed. He has an open book lying on his chest. He is asleep. His hair looks soft on the pillow. His arms are resting across his grey T-shirt covered torso. The book rises and falls evenly. A small silver box sits on the bed-side table. It is big enough to hold only a ring. There is a card beneath it. There is also a candle burning softly beside the box. She picks up the box and retrieves the card. Reading it, her eyes fill with tears.

'I am not asleep,' the card reads,

'You are with me in my dream. I am awake to your love. Dream with me, sleep with me. Awaken with me. Live with me, always.'

She opens the box and puts his grandmother's antique diamond filigree ring on the fourth finger of her left hand.

Lena My Lovely

Rosemund Handler

When I was a boy I would often have vivid dreams of falling: down steps, off my bike, tripping and rolling under a moving car. Always, the visible parts were my head and neck; the rest of me had been somehow painlessly removed. In these dreams, in which I was both actor and spectator, I had no trunk, no legs or feet, but that did not stop me from repeatedly urging myself to stand. Nothing would happen. My head lay on the ground like a ball at rest, anxious blue eyes staring up at a shadowy sky. Was I waiting to be kicked or to be carried away? Who was I waiting for?

In the dreams nobody came. I was never picked up, never rescued. When I woke up my face was wet with tears, the pillow damp. Sometimes, when the intensity of my heart's panicky pounding frightened me, I padded across and climbed into my brother's bed. Phil was two years older than me and big for his age. His bed was wide, with a coir mattress that dipped in the middle so that I slid down against his back. His warmth slowed my breathing and I would fall asleep.

There is one day I recall with piercing clarity, as if a light in a far corner of my mind never got switched off. Phil and I were in the long passageway of our home, throwing a ball to each other – one of the activities our mother had given up trying to prevent – when the doorbell rang. We never let anything get between us and our game, not even the unusual event of a doorbell ringing in the afternoon, so my mother, who had become adept at ducking when caught in our crossfire, dodged the ball and opened the front door herself.

The strangers' voices at the door were slow and clear. I remember the word alcohol rang in my ear with the authority of the school bell. It could have been written in the sky by one of those planes that advertise a product you cannot live without.

The ball bounced dolefully on the floor behind me.

My mother thanked the two policemen and closed the door without turning around. By this time Phil and I were standing behind her, close together. When she finally turned to us I thought she would be crying, but she wasn't. Pink splotches had mushroomed across her face and neck.

You heard.

Phil and I nodded in unison.

Go upstairs to your room, she ordered quietly.

In the bedroom we shared we sat on Phil's bed side by side and said nothing. I wished he would touch my hand or put his arm around me as he sometimes did when I messed up in our ball game, but he didn't. My throat was dry, my eyes even drier. I sneaked a look at Phil. He was gazing thoughtfully at the carpet, not a tear in sight. I wondered if there was something wrong with us. The death brought to our door by the policemen was not that of a stranger, but our own father's. Yet neither of us was crying.

Our mother's bedroom door remained closed to us. The silence behind it was dark and heavy.

* * *

My mother had worked hard to conceal my father's drinking. I'm not sure what the neighbours thought, but Phil and I understood without exchanging a word that my father's mother and his two sisters knew, yet never allowed themselves to know, that their son and brother was a drunk.

Sodden with drink my father was unreachable, exuding a foggy breath of spirits that percolated the house and seemed to stain it the colour of brandy. I stayed away as much as I could, which, after school finished for the day, wasn't much. When he was sober it was worse, because then he seemed unfamiliar, a grey-faced, hard-eyed stranger, and it was almost a relief when he crossed rapidly from tight-lipped sobriety to loud, discursive drunkenness. His dirty collar and askew tie, his open mouth flecked with tobacco like bits of seaweed disgusted me, but didn't make me afraid. Drunk he was oddly predictable and his talkativeness made me feel less alienated. He loved talking about sport, especially rugby, and was well-informed, though he never once came to

see either of us play (Phil rugby and me tennis) and never asked about our games. Phil said he got most of his information from the radio and the lectures were his way of communicating with us. But when the drink ran out the talk dried up with it, and he fell asleep with his face buried in a corner of the couch stained from his drool.

At the dinner table he would brood over his food, chewing and swallowing and taking small sips of water from a glass, his bulbous Adam's apple jerking up and down like a pendulum. His silence made my mother chatty and manically cheerful, like a flying insect brought to garish life by a rainstorm, only to die when it was over. Food would lock in my throat, almost choking me, but Phil coped better with the silences and the gaiety, talking easily about the events of his day. Sometimes he'd catch my eye and wink, and the food would slip past the lump in my throat.

I was okay with a ball, but Phil could do almost anything with one. He told me he got his skills from our father. Dad used to kick a ball with me when you were still a baby, kiddo. Maybe one day he'll show you what he can do.

He never did. At school I had observed with some curiosity the bantering affection that seemed the norm between other boys and their fathers, but the possibility that any such connection could be mine never really entered my head. My father spent a good part of his time after work with his mother and his two unmarried sisters in their gloomy apartment, discussing God knows what, money, perhaps, and the only throwing or kicking he did was with an empty bottle, aimed unerringly at the trashcan.

At night we would hear his bass drill from our bedroom now and then, grumbling to our mother, and her placating murmur in response. Phil said it was about work, that dad hated his work as an accountant. I saw the way he looked at our mother and intuited, young as I was, that she was the kind of woman he likely believed he deserved, but not the kind of woman he admired. I wasn't sure what kind that was, but I thought she would have been tall and pretty, nothing like the shamed, shambling, sad-faced woman who watched her family with pinkish apprehensive eyes while her fingers knitted away with a dexterity that never manifested itself in anything else about her.

I was nine when my father was killed in the accident, too young to go to the funeral. I was left with a neighbour's maid, with whom I played

Rummy, and Phil went with my mother. Afterwards my brother told me that there were fifteen people present, including our grandmother and aunts and the rabbi. My father had never been to synagogue and the rabbi hadn't ever seen him, but Phil said he did his best, describing my father as a good man who died tragically. A man who loved his family and took care of them.

He didn't, though; at least he didn't leave provision for us. It turned out that he had spent what money he'd made on some fool scheme that involved gambling, and to make matters worse, had willed the house to his mother and sisters. Our grandmother announced at the reading of the will that we could continue to live in the house until Phil and I finished school and university. No offer of help was extended to our mother beyond the right to occupy her own home with her sons. Phil was present, and repeated to me grandmother's exact words: *You will have to find work, my dear, the sooner the better, to support your family.*

* * *

Almost overnight the clenching of my stomach that was habitual when my father was around vanished. Not two days after his funeral, Phil and I were laughing and pummeling each other with pillows in our bedroom. Our grandmother was downstairs with our mother in the living room. The expression on grandmother's face when we came downstairs was chillingly my father's. His dead breath seemed to fan my face and I found myself trembling, disliking her intensely. At the same time I read in her eyes the power she wielded over us and I longed for her to go, to leave us alone forever. As our father had.

Armed with little education and less experience, mother was offered a job at the company my father worked for. I overheard my grandmother mention that the scheme he had got himself involved with had originated from his place of work, so perhaps they took pity on his widow. She took the job and began, ten days after my father was buried, to interview maids. We'd never had a maid before; my mother had done all the housework and cooking, and was always at home when Phil and I got back from school.

A succession of black and brown women entered and left the kitchen without being offered the job. I had no idea what my mother was looking for in these women, who seemed as mystified as I was when

they left. Over and above domestic skills my mother appeared to have something – or someone – specific in mind. Apparently none of the women brought it with them into our dusky little kitchen.

I was eating a peanut butter sandwich when Lena turned up at the back door, uninvited, for an interview. She told my mother she had been sent by a neighbour. I could see in my mother's eyes she was about to close the door in the woman's face, but for some reason she didn't. Lena walked in. It was after five on a wintry afternoon and she was shivering in a worn jacket. She noticed me chewing and staring at her and smiled. I smiled back.

My mother switched on the light, the better to see this new candidate, and made them both a cup of tea which they drank together at the kitchen table. I finished my sandwich and listened to the questions and answers I had heard at least six times before. Something about the way my mother began leaning across the table, her hands folded tightly together, coupled with the eager, attentive expression on her face, told me that she had found in the newcomer what she was looking for.

Lena was dark and small, her arms and legs so thin that a south-east wind could have snapped them in two. Her hair was brownish, crinkly and soft-looking; it made me want to touch it with peanut-buttery fingers. Her green eyes were couched in neat round bruises with rows of tiny creases at the sides, and as she spoke her nostrils dilated and contracted constantly. She seemed old to me, yet young too, her close-mouthed smiles as bright as the neon-pink sandals on her calloused feet, glistening as her legs crossed and uncrossed. I wondered how somebody could be pretty and plain at the same time, and liked her more every moment even though she hadn't yet addressed a word to me. At one point, possibly as a response to my avid scrutiny, she leaned across to where I sat beside my mother and brushed my cheek with the back of her hand.

I flinched. I was unused to being touched by anyone other than my mother or Phil, and that seldom enough. Lena frowned, a fleeting wrinkle of brow and nose.

By the time she got up to leave it was getting dark. Those days it was much safer than it is now, but people had on occasion been attacked and robbed in our neighbourhood. My mother asked Lena if it was all right for her to walk alone. She replied that she was staying with a maid

who lived a little way down the road. As she was walking out of the door, my mother took a deep breath.

When can you start, Lena?

Tomorrow, replied Lena, unsurprised. Are you going to check my references first?

They agreed she would start at the end of the week. My mother would have three days to train her before starting work herself.

* * *

Coming home from school was a new experience. Lena was waiting for us, and there was always something good to eat for lunch. She often made our favourites, hot dogs and hamburgers, and after the first week sat down with us at the kitchen table and asked questions about school. Our mother's questions, dutiful but perfunctory, were greeted with monosyllabic responses, yet after Lena's first week Phil confessed that he often teased the young math teacher mercilessly and got caned for it by the headmaster.

He beats the crap out of me at least twice a week, he said glumly.

A glimmer of mischief: You want to see my bum?

Lena laughed delightedly. You're sitting on it, so he doesn't do such a good job, does he?

I told her about the bully who wrestled with me in the playground, and then proudly recited the marks I got for tests. And so it went: we told Lena our news, good and bad, and after her second week we vied with each other to tell her the stories we thought would appeal to her most. She smiled her closed-mouth little smile and laughed at our jokes as if our brilliant humour had taken her by surprise.

I loved her laughter. It was almost silent, a hiss or an astounded whistle which widened her eyes rather than narrowing them. I caught glimpses of her teeth, brownish stumps with gaps in between, and I wondered what had caused such damage. Of the two of us, I was the more curious about Lena. But when I asked questions, she ruffled my hair and got to her feet to do the dishes.

Occasionally I persisted. Do you have a family? Where do they live? Come on, Lena, be a sport and tell me just one of your secrets!

She leaned across and chucked me under the chin. My family live very far away.

When I pressed her, she widened her eyes at me and pouted. My family is boring. You are much more fun! Let's talk about the bully. Did Phil get him for you yet?

Her encouragement and praise made us quite boastful, and we talked our heads off. Once, she asked about our father. The kitchen grew dark and quiet. I didn't answer her. I couldn't bear the vision of my father in the same room as Lena.

Phil shrugged into the silence. He died in an accident. We don't talk about him.

Our mother, who was being trained as a bookkeeper, came home from work looking exhausted and harassed. She sat white-faced in the study staring at a manual on her lap, clearly struggling to cope, only too pleased that Lena, without being asked, took care of dinner, staying many evenings far later than other domestic workers would have. I never heard her complain or ask for more money. Seamlessly, within a matter of months, she was part of the family, and mother came to depend on her for everything to do with us and with the running of the house.

How is everything, Lena, was her first question after she let herself in after work. Have they done their homework?

Sometimes I sat on the living room couch beside my mother, dinner odours wafting pleasantly through the room, and asked about her day. She would grimace slightly and force a smile. Once or twice, perhaps when she was particularly distressed about work, she took my hand and held it hard between her cold palms; unwittingly she transmitted her anxiety to me. After a minute I removed my hand and slunk off to the kitchen, which smelt of fresh bread and rich stew.

At dinner, Phil usually sat as far from our mother as he could. Without Lena's presence to leaven the atmosphere, he ate his food quickly and excused himself from the table. I wasn't sure what my brother's feelings were, whether he was angry with our mother or whether he pitied her. Perhaps he was ashamed of her beseeching looks and fearfulness. I knew she would never have dared to hold his hand.

The same year Lena came to work for us, Phil's voice began to deepen. He grew like a weed until he was almost a head taller than me, his limbs stretched out of skinny boyhood, got powerful and muscular. He became the school's best tennis player and a valued flyhalf in first team rugby. As the months went by he spent more time away from home, preoccupied with matters he chose not to share with me, such as

school sporting events and photographs of naked women (I found two under his pillow, grainy and startling).

He was slipping away from me. I felt the loss of his attention keenly, especially when, toward the end of that year, he stopped coming home with me after school. When I asked where he was going, he told me to mind my own business. Some days I watched from a window and saw boys waiting for him at the end of our road. When he came around the corner and saw them, he threw his backpack into our garden and they all ran off together. I longed to know where they were going; I longed for Phil to invite me to go with them.

He celebrated his thirteenth birthday at a friend's house. Perhaps to spite my grandmother he adamantly refused a barmitzvah, and my mother, too preoccupied with her own troubles, did not insist. One evening, without telling me, Phil took all his things, including his bed, which I secretly coveted, and moved into the spare room. That night, alone in our bedroom, I missed him enough to shed shameful tears into my pillow. It came to me then that the brother I worshipped had been gone from me for months, and that it was Lena who had prevented his absence from hurting too much.

After school the next day Phil went off with his friends and I sat in the kitchen and asked Lena why he didn't like me anymore.

She sat beside me, took my grubby hand in hers and looked into my eyes.

It is not your fault, my sweetie. Your brother loves you just the same. It is his growing up time, and that is how it is with growing up. It will happen to you too one day.

She turned away from me. He is going to be a big strong man, she added softly.

Her voice sounded sad.

What about me, Lena? Will I be strong too?

She chuckled. You will be the stronger! she exclaimed, and pinched my cheek.

I wasn't sure how she could know this, nor was I sure I agreed with her, but I felt much better.

A few weeks after this conversation, I visited a friend who lived nearby after school, and called Lena from his home to let her know where I was. She said she missed me and asked about my homework, which I assured her we would do together.

I left my friend's house early and trudged home, feeling guilty about a geography test at the end of the week for which I knew I was unprepared; to make matters worse, my friend and I had got involved in a game of cricket and we hadn't even come close to finishing our homework.

I had my own key and let myself in. To my surprise, Lena was not in the kitchen, which was dark and cold. It was close to dinner time, but there were no cooking smells and no pots on the stove. Then I remembered that my mother had a business cocktail party to attend that evening, and had instructed Lena to give us leftovers for dinner.

A basket full of dirty laundry lay next to the washing machine. I eyed it quizzically. Lena was too orderly to leave dirty laundry lying about; it was immediately bunged into the machine. The house was very quiet without her. I removed my backpack and walked up the stairs. I knew Phil was probably still out, but where was Lena?

At the top of the stairs I walked into my room; then out again.

The door to Phil's room was closed. I felt a wash of relief. For once he was home, even if Lena wasn't. He must be was studying for a test.

I opened the door and walked in.

Nipples pursued me like two red eyes. Her face was rubbery, slackened by sleep, and her mole-splotched skin belonged in one of Phil's dirty photographs. A blanket covered the lower half of her body.

Phil, a sheet rumpled between his knees, was on his side, naked, his cheek hard up against her back. He was fast asleep, his mouth askew and slightly open. A painful-looking boil on his forehead glowered at me. I hadn't seen his body for a long time. There was spidery hair on his thighs and a sprinkling on his chest; a thicket bloomed around his flaccid private parts.

The shape, drape and sprawl of my thirteen-year-old brother were those of a grown man.

Lena's eyes opened. She lay there, looking at me without moving, without even blinking. I wanted to do something, to run away, but I couldn't. There was a shifting away, a reluctance or resistance in her eyes.

She said, Go, get out of here. Go downstairs. I'm coming in a minute to make you a sandwich.

* * *

Phil didn't talk to me for days. It dawned on me that I had got it wrong, that my brother had abandoned me long before I thought he had, maybe soon after our father was killed. Until I saw him in that room, in that bed, I hadn't known that he had taken Lena, my lovely Lena, with him.

She chatted away to me that evening as she caught up with her chores. She never stopped talking the next afternoon, when I came home early to study for my test. As if nothing had happened.

But it had. I was not the boy I had been before I found them together. Neither was Lena, the Lena I thought I knew so well. Nothing could change that. Nothing she said or did could bring that beloved person back to me.

A week went by and Phil finally tried to speak to me, but I turned my back on him each time. After a while he stopped trying. Lena did not give up: she did her best to get back to how it had been before between us, but I wouldn't play ball. The smile that I loved became uncertain. Then it went away.

Our mother eventually noticed that Phil and I barely spoke, scarcely even looked in each other's direction. She was upset and asked questions, but neither of us proffered an explanation. How could she begin to understand the abyss that separated us? Wisely, she didn't persist – I think she decided to put the change down to the gulf of our two years' age difference – but the old anxious expression came and went on her face when, at dinner, the leaden hush felt as if the very ceiling had caved in on top of us.

Lena was always in the kitchen when I came home from school. If Phil's door was closed, he was in his room. As far as I knew – like a dog, the smells, sounds and feel of that house were instinctive – the two of them were never together in that room, or Phil's bed, again.

* * *

Some four months after I found Lena with my brother, she glided like a shadow into the living room. My mother's eyes were closed, her head resting against the back of the couch. I was doing a crossword puzzle; Phil was reading the newspaper on the floor.

Lena stood in front of my mother and spoke quietly.

Dinner is ready, madam. I must leave now.

My mother's eyes didn't open. Yes, I know. Thank you, Lena.

As an afterthought, she murmured. You're due for your holiday soon. We can discuss it tomorrow.

No madam, I don't mind about the holiday. But I cannot work here anymore. Her voice faltered. I am sorry.

My mother's eyes popped open.

I bit my lip, but wouldn't look at Lena, though she tried to catch my eye. I noticed Phil had stopped reading the newspaper. His right fist was clenched.

What? cried my mother. Why, Lena? I thought you were happy here. I need you, I depend on you. The boys adore you. Is this about money?

Lena's head twitched, a tiny dissenting shake. It is my problem, madam. It is nothing to do with the money.

What is it then, pleaded my mother. I can't let you go, you know that!

I must go, madam.

She hesitated. I am pregnant.

I gazed fixedly at my mother's pale face. She was chewing her lip, her chest rising and falling rapidly. I sneaked a look at Phil. His skin was papery, his lower lip quivering. I felt no pity. Outrage imploded, embedded itself in my chest and stomach.

Lena, said my mother slowly, you must be over forty.

I am forty-five, replied Lena.

There must be something you can do. You're much too old to be having a baby. Who is the father?

Lena shrugged. It doesn't matter. He cannot help me. There is nothing to do, madam.

But there was. I gave Phil a poisonous glare. He turned his back on me and got to his feet. He walked past Lena and out of the front door and didn't come home that night.

The next day, Lena wasn't in the kitchen waiting for me. My mother was. She was seated at the kitchen table, having taken the afternoon off work to interview the woman who would take Lena's place.

* * *

People say if you want to know the story of a person's life, take a good look at the eyes, at the skin, they will tell the tale. I say look at the teeth.

If Lena's were anything to go by, her life story was in those scrag ends, the moraine of her toil and struggles, only we didn't pay attention. We didn't care.

Nearly thirty-five years have gone by since I was a boy of ten or eleven. As each year goes by, the events of my childhood seem more real than my own life. I am forty-five now, the age Lena was when she left us. I have never married and live alone in the house I grew up in. Phil, after three childless marriages and three divorces, is dead of a heart attack while on the treadmill at the gym. My mother is in frail care, suffering from dementia, her brow ageless, smooth at last, lips curved in a slight smile as she gazes endlessly down at her clasped hands.

Not long ago, Lena came to me at last. It was in a dream. I knew it was her by the teeth, and by the hiss and whistle of her laughter. I reached out to her, feeling the old yearning, the blood-dark pit she left behind that a lifetime has not filled. But the blackness closed over her, taking the ghost of her laughter with it.

Heaven (or Something Like It)

Sarah Lotz

Adele opened her eyes and stared up at the familiar banana-shaped stain on the ceiling above her bed. Idly wondering if she should ask Manu, the caretaker, to take a look at the grubby paintwork, it struck her in a moment of startling clarity that this would be pointless, as she was, in fact, quite dead. She even had a hazy recollection of the moment of her death, which had unfortunately occurred halfway through the finale of *Survivor: Antarctica*. She might never find out who'd won the million dollar prize now. She hoped it was the wimpy guy with the post-adolescent acne and not the brittle blonde with plastic breasts. She'd always had a bit of a thing for the underdog.

She was less certain why it was that her soul had arrived back at her flat instead of staking a place in heaven, hell or Nirvana (or any other mythical place for that matter), but here she was, nonetheless. And although she'd been plagued by anxiety attacks most of her life, strangely enough the knowledge that she was dead didn't seem to worry her in the slightest, (although surely dying was among the top ten stressors of everyday life, after divorce but before moving house?). Oh well, it could be worse. Her bed, after all, was her refuge, the centre of her existence – she'd set it up that way. The widescreen television was conveniently fixed in place at the foot of the bed, and the two side tables that flanked the headboard were large enough to hold several hours' worth of Pringle tubes, Pepsi Max bottles and Woolworths' tikka chicken bites.

But why *had* she come back? Was she having her own personal Patrick Swayze *Ghost* moment? Could she be a restless spirit? Unlikely. She'd never been very active when she was alive. She ran her hands over her body. She certainly didn't feel ghost-like or ethereal. Dying was

obviously as ineffective a method for losing excess kilos as the miracle weight-loss remedies she'd bought from Verimark infomercials.

According to the green digital numbers on the DVD player, it was 9.30am. In her old life – the one where she was actually alive – she'd be at the office by now, but there was hardly any point calling in sick in her current condition. She sat up, stretched, and looked around. The room was much the same as she'd left it, maybe a touch tidier. She sniffed the air. No scent of decay. They must have found her body fairly soon after she'd died. Probably thanks to Previn, the office manager, who was always one to sound the alarm if shirking was suspected. She was quite content to stay in bed while she figured out what to do next.

How long had she been gone? Hours? Days? Weeks? But what did it matter? There was nothing she could do about it now. She pushed all the unanswered questions out of her mind, settled back with a sigh of contentment, and reached for the remote. She flicked straight to the Series channel. *Desperate Housewives*. Lovely. She'd always felt an affinity for Lynette, the least glamorous of the women on the show, and it was her favourite episode – the one where Lynette beats cancer. Could life (or death) get better than this?

Although she could have quite happily spent the morning lost in a BBC Lifestyle *Spendaholics* marathon, the next day she decided it was time to experiment with her new 'self'. She half expected that she wouldn't be able to leave the flat, like Geena Davis in *Beetlejuice*, but it was a simple matter to slip through the door (quite literally – apparently the dead have no use for handles). She didn't bother with the lift, and cruised effortlessly down the six flights of stairs. Robert the security guard didn't even glance up from his *Cape Times* when she approached the front desk, nor did he react when she jumped up and down in front of him like a demented overweight cheerleader. Interestingly, though, he did flinch when she stroked her fingernails across his forearm.

A brief tour around the Garden Centre's Woolworths confirmed her suspicion that the living were as oblivious to her presence as a rich suburbanite to a squatter, and she headed gratefully back to her flat. The fact that she was invisible to those around her was nothing new. She'd never enjoyed going out or socialising, so why should this change now she was dead?

In fact, being dead had massive benefits. Death was an excellent reason to quit her job, and all her bodily functions seemed to have fled

along with her pulse. She no longer needed (or felt the need) to eat, defecate, drink or wash, and consequently had no reason to leave the flat. Peculiarly, although most objects seemed to slip through her fingers, her most essential possession – the DSTV remote – responded perfectly to her touch.

* * *

Two weeks went by: Two blissful weeks of *Ellen*, true crime documentaries, Lifestyle programmes and Hallmark channel weepies. By the end of the second week she knew everything there was to know about the Lockerbie disaster, could have rearranged her closets with ease and she even had a fair idea, thanks to a flamboyantly gay designer type, How to Look Good Naked (not that this would be of any use to her in the foreseeable future). Then, one morning, as she was settling down under the covers for a movie about a woman with alopecia, she heard the unmistakable scratch of a key at the lock. The door opened, and her sister, Liza, strode into the room, picking her way across the parquet on designer wedge heels. Adele was aghast. She hadn't seen or spoken to Liza in at least five years. What on earth was she doing here?

'So this is it,' Liza said, flapping her hand in front of her face as if she smelled something foul. A youngish guy in a shiny silk suit followed her into the centre of the room. Adele couldn't take her eyes off his hair. It looked solid, almost as if it had been carved out of plastic. He had to be an estate agent. With that hair he could hardly be anything else.

'Hello, Liza!' Adele said clearly. 'Long time no see!' Neither Liza nor Plastic Hair even glanced in her direction.

'Tiny, isn't it?' Liza said. 'A what-do-you-call-it – a bachelor flat?'

Plastic Hair flashed his bleached teeth. 'We call them studio apartments.'

'Still. One room. Imagine.'

He motioned towards the bed. 'Is this where –?'

'She died? Yeah.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. We weren't close.'

Adele winced at her sister's callousness, although she had to agree with her. It was hard to believe they were even related. Adele was well-padded and phlegmatic, while Liza was high-strung and skinny. Liza's

three marriages had produced four private school kids, whereas Adele's one short engagement had ended in an embarrassing sexual episode. She vaguely recalled that Liza lived in Sandton with an ANC politician, and for all intents and purposes Adele was married to her Sealy Posturpedic and DSTV remote.

'Nice big bed,' Plastic Hair said suggestively. Liza ignored him. He clearly didn't feature on her radar of possible liaisons.

'You know,' the guy said, taking Liza's dismissal in his stride. 'With the World Cup coming up, renting might be the way to go.'

'I was actually looking for a quick sale.'

Plastic Hair thrust out his chest and ran a hand over his head. His hair didn't budge an inch. 'Market's depressed. Short-term lets, holiday accommodation, that kind of thing. Could bring in a mint.'

Liza finished trailing a talon across Adele's DVD rack, and stalked over to the wardrobe to clack through the clothes.

'Look at all this!' Liza said, pulling out a rayon blouse that Adele used to wear every Wednesday to work. 'I wouldn't be seen dead in this stuff.' She glanced at Plastic Hair and they shared a collusive chuckle.

'We could rent it fully furnished,' Plastic Hair said.

'Fine. It's not as though it matters if anything gets damaged.'

'You happy to leave the television here?'

Adele held her breath, but Liza nodded as if she couldn't care less. 'Piece of junk. Why not?'

For the first time since she'd died, Adele found herself infused with emotion – anger. Piece of junk? She'd spent eighteen months paying that off. Was Liza blind? It was a Samsung for God sakes! And what right did Liza have to barge in here and sell her flat from under her? She wasn't finished with it yet! Before she was fully aware of what she was doing, Adele stalked over to where Liza was gingerly picking through her underwear drawer, grimacing at a pair of support knickers, and slapped her across the face. Although Adele felt her hand connect with her sister's powdery cheek, Liza didn't flinch, although she did drop the underpants immediately back into the drawer, where they concealed the half-empty packets of Diazepam.

'Bit chilly in here, isn't it?' Liza said. 'Cape Town winters. Ugh.' She shuddered. 'Rental it is then.'

And with that Liza and Plastic Hair left.

Two days later Adele watched from her perch on the bed as her beloved collection of Julia Roberts and Meg Ryan DVDs, Jodi Picoult novels and comfortable winter sweat suits were carelessly shoved into boxes by a crew of taciturn removal men. She didn't bother to stop them. All she needed was the bed and the television, and those were staying.

* * *

Three weeks later the tenants started to dribble in. Her biggest concern was the sleeping arrangements. She didn't see why she should have to vacate the bed, it was hers after all. So when the first visitor, a German businessman with pockmarked greyish skin arrived, Adele stubbornly refused to budge from her spot closest to the window. She was taken aback when he wasted no time in ringing up an escort agency, but she needn't have worried. His particular brand of fun didn't involve the bed, and in any case Adele was glued to the *American Idol* Miami auditions, and barely took any notice of the antics going on in the bathroom. After the exhausted escort left, Adele watched nervously as the German stripped down to his threadbare jocks and climbed into bed beside her. She lay with her hands tucked into her sides, rigid as a two-day-old corpse, but the guy seemed to edge as far away from her side of the bed as he could, even in his sleep. At three am he woke up shivering almost uncontrollably. Adele was pretty sure this was down to her, although she'd always thought of herself as a warm-hearted person. The next morning he packed up his briefcase and left, barking broken English expletives into his phone.

Over the next few weeks, Adele found herself sharing her space with a wide variety of single holidaymakers, businessmen and young couples seeking budget accommodation. She didn't find them too much of a pain on the whole. The main inconvenience was the lack of control over the television. Several had terrible taste in programming. One couple in particular were irrevocably hooked on E! Entertainment, a channel Adele found banal to the point of tears. She couldn't bear programmes with no narrative thread, even *Oprah*, *Hell's Kitchen* and *The Amazing Race* had something of a story-line if you looked closely enough.

It was the male tenants who generally had the worst taste. Although they didn't watch quite as much sport as she'd feared, more than one had flicked onto e-TV for the late night 'erotic selection' while

fumbling lamely under the covers. Any regrets Adele might previously have harboured about being single were snuffed out after sharing her bed with several choice specimens. It was incredible how many of them would grunt, fart, moan and scratch in their sleep. The couples were almost as bad. Adele had assumed that she'd be sidelined during torrid sex sessions, but this wasn't the case. Most preferred to expend their energy sniping at each other. And hiding the remote didn't seem to help. The more resourceful of them figured out that channels could be changed on the television itself. She had one notable battle of wills with an elderly Joburg businessman when her final of *The Bachelor: London Calling* clashed with *Top Gear*. She'd been forced to run her fingers over the businessman's sweaty pate to eject him out of the flat, but it had been worth it. She loathed Jeremy Clarkson.

After a while Adele grew used to the sound of Plastic Hair's voice as he wearily introduced another unfortunate tenant to the flat. But they never stayed longer than two days before hastily packing up and heading to the nearest Formula One. From the furious cell phone calls they made as they fled, most of them were seriously freaked out by the flat's 'vibe'. In particular, they objected to the 'haunted television' that would mysteriously channel hop at night, and that would switch itself on, even when the flat was deserted.

Gradually fewer and fewer lessees arrived to disrupt Adele's peace, and she found herself drifting back into her routine of cruising the light entertainment channels. She didn't miss the interruptions, and began to feel a curious and passionate kinship with the inhabitants of Albert Square, Wisteria Lane and the Baltimore gangsters of *The Wire*. They were her family. She didn't need anyone else.

* * *

Then, one rainy Tuesday morning, as Adele was snuggling in to watch *The Bold and the Beautiful* followed by a two-hour made for television movie about a rapist, she heard the tell-tale scrabble at the lock and the sound of muffled voices. She recognised Plastic Hair's nasal tones instantly. He marched into the room, a woman trailing in his wake. This was a first. Adele had shared her flat with several men of all ages and at least five couples, but never a woman on her own. Adele eyed her with interest. The woman appeared to be about her age, overweight (but

on the right side of obese), and clearly uncomfortable in her own skin. She continually tugged at the hem of her over-sized T-shirt, stretching it to cover her bum. Adele felt a sudden rush of what she could only call 'sisterliness' for her. She wished she could tell her that dying was great for self-consciousness and other body-image issues.

'So this is it,' Plastic Hair said, not even bothering to sound fakely enthusiastic. Despite herself Adele felt slightly sorry for him. His failure to secure even a temporary tenant must be taking its toll. And failure was something Adele understood perfectly. Plastic Hair peered at the television and scrunched up his nose in irritation. 'Not again.'

He strode towards the bed and snatched at the controller, brushing against Adele in the process. He paused, shivered then tried to hide his discomfort with a nervous cough and a glance in the mirror on the wall in front of him.

The woman remained silent and shuffled towards the window to check out the view over Hope Street.

Behind her back Plastic Hair smothered a yawn. 'I think I should tell you,' he said, scuffing his pointy black shoes on the parquet flooring, 'We've had a few ... complaints about the flat.'

'Oh yes?'

'People say that they feel ... strange when they're in here.'

What do you mean?' The woman sat down on the bed and bounced gently on the mattress. Adele moved with her. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling.

He tried to laugh, but it sounded forced. 'You know, they say crazy things – that it's haunted, that kind of thing. Ridiculous really.'

'Oh. *That* kind of thing doesn't bother me,' the woman said.

'I wouldn't have said anything, only ... if you took a long lease ... once you'd signed it would be tricky to get out of it.'

'That's fine. Really.'

Plastic Hair looked annoyed that she wasn't hanging onto his every word. He leaned towards her. 'She committed suicide, you know,' he murmured. 'The woman who lived here. The woman who owned this flat.'

Adele sat up. 'I didn't!' she shouted, indignant. How dare he lie like that! For a second she forgot that she couldn't be heard. For some reason it was suddenly very important to her that the woman know the truth about her death. Adele flopped back down on the bed. But what was the

truth? How *had* she actually died? She'd assumed it was some sort of embolism brought on by too many Woolworths' steak and kidney pies. Her recollection of the exact moment of her death was vague at best. But in the scheme of things, what did it matter? Dying had turned out to be the best thing that had happened to her in her whole life.

Plastic Hair coughed impatiently. 'So what do you say? Interested?'

'I'd like a long lease,' the woman said. 'Will that be a problem?'

* * *

The woman – Carmen (according to the *Dish* magazine envelope) – moved in two weeks later. Adele didn't think the woman's name suited her, but then she'd always thought her own name was equally incongruous – more suitable for a French schoolgirl than a middle-aged woman. Adele watched with interest as Carmen methodically unpacked her few possessions. On the whole she approved. Carmen had quite a comprehensive DVD collection, many of them duplicating Adele's own favourites. How lovely, she thought, eyeing *Pretty Woman* and *Don't Look Now*. She was dying to see those again!

That night, when Carmen climbed into bed, Adele reached over and softly touched her hair. Carmen froze for a second, then simply shook her head, turned over and fell asleep, considerably leaving the television tuned to the Crime and Investigation channel. Adele was flummoxed. She'd never encountered that reaction before. No matter. Tomorrow was another day.

The next afternoon, Adele made sure the television was on at maximum volume when Carmen returned home from work. But instead of tutting in irritation and reaching for the remote, Carmen merely paused at the door, shrugged and started to unpack her groceries. Curiouser and curiouser. Carmen didn't seem to be even slightly perturbed at her dead housemate's behaviour. In fact, over the next couple of days, it was almost as if she was encouraging Adele's antics. Carmen would let whatever movie, talk show or reality sound-bite Adele had left on run its course while she made her supper, selected that evening's snacks and got ready for bed.

As the days rolled on, it became clear that their taste in television was uncannily similar. Sometimes Adele even forgot that Carmen had

control of the remote when she was home – it was as if they shared a psychic connection when it came to changing channels. Carmen would inevitably nip a tedious serial killer documentary in the bud at the exact point where Adele herself would have done so. And only last night Carmen had switched from a re-run of *The Office* to *Love, Actually* just as Adele was thinking she was in the mood for a light romantic comedy.

By the end of the first week, Adele actually found herself looking forward to Carmen's return home from work. She'd often spend the hour just before Carmen was due to arrive cruising the channels for something her new housemate might like to watch. Soon she could tell by the sound of Carmen's footsteps as she approached the door if it was a *Strictly Come Dancing* night (bad day at work), or a documentary on Arthur Shawcross (pre-menstrual cramps). Life soon found a peaceful rhythm, and they were rarely interrupted. Like Adele when she was alive, Carmen seldom left the flat, and she hadn't received a single visitor since she moved in.

Until one Friday evening. Adele and Carmen were lying in their usual places on the bed. *Project Runway* was on, and they were watching with bated breath as a wiry Israeli designer burst into tears as his fabric 'misbehaved'. Both women jumped as the intercom buzzed. Adele didn't miss the look of dismay on Carmen's face.

There was the brisk clitter-clatter of heels from the corridor outside, a sharp rat-tat-tat and Carmen opened the door to a slender woman who could have played the role of a brittle DA in *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. The woman kissed the air around Carmen's hair, then tripped over to the couch. She perched on one corner, a fixed smile on her face.

'This is ... homely, Carmen!'

Carmen seemed to shrink into herself, as if her already limited self-esteem was dribbling out of a leak in her skin.

The woman sighed and nodded towards the television. 'Please turn that off. You're not a child who has to watch television continuously, are you?'

Was it Adele's imagination, or did Carmen glance apologetically towards her side of the bed as she reached for the remote?

'That's better.' Adele could see that the woman meant business. 'Now. You know Mom's not getting any younger.'

Carmen looked down at her hands. 'I know.'

‘Not to mention her other problems. The forgetting, the wandering. That sort of thing.’

Head still bent, Carmen picked at the skin around her thumbnail. Adele hardly recognised her as the same woman who could watch a documentary on Jeffrey Dahmer without wincing at the gushy bits.

‘Now, Grant and I have been discussing it, and we’ve decided that it’s only fair that you should be the one to move back in with her.’

Adele watched, fascinated, as Carmen’s head snapped up. Even from her perch on the bed, she could make out the glitter of tears in Carmen’s eyes. She’d only seen her housemate cry once, during a particularly emotionally trying episode of *Grey’s Anatomy*.

‘Why me?’ Carmen said, voice wavering. ‘You’re her favourite!’

The woman sighed. ‘Yes. But I have a family. I couldn’t possibly –’

‘I have a life!’

‘You go girl!’ Adele said, recalling a similar conversation from her own life. But she didn’t want to dwell on how that had turned out.

‘Come on, Carmen. You can’t call this a life! This place is ... is ... squalid! What kind of a life could you possibly have?’

‘I have my job!’

‘You hate your job! You’ve told me that countless times. If you moved in with Mom you’d be far more comfortable.’

‘Why not put her in a home?’

‘Have you any idea how much they cost?’

‘But she hates me!’

‘No she doesn’t!’

Adele was leaning so far forward that she almost slipped off the bed.

‘She does! You know she does!’

The woman sighed, stood up, brushed at the back of her skirt as if sitting on the couch had soiled it somehow, and stalked towards the window. She pulled the curtain aside and gazed down into Hope Street. ‘You don’t want to live like this at your age! It’s ridiculous.’

Adele watched as a tear wobbled down Carmen’s right cheek.

The woman rolled her eyes and, as Adele had hoped she would, sat down on the bed. ‘Really, Carmen. You’re becoming an embarrassment to the family.’

‘I just want to be left alone!’

Now that was a sentiment Adele understood. Taking a deep breath, she pulled her legs underneath her body and launched herself at the woman, smothering her in a bear-hug. Adele could smell the powder on her skin and the greasy scent of her lipstick.

The woman froze. She remained immobile for less than a second, and then she pushed herself off the bed with the suddenness of someone experiencing an electric shock. She skittered over to the kitchenette and leaned against the counter, eyes bulging. But Adele wasn't finished with her. She glided over and traced her fingertips over the woman's forearms. The woman jumped and immediately began brushing herself down as if her skin was writhing with invisible spiders.

Adele checked Carmen's reaction. She was still sitting on the couch, staring straight at her sister, who had finally found her voice.

'Ugh!' she said. 'Ugh!' But it seemed that was all she could manage. With a final terrified glance around the room she grabbed her handbag and fled, high heels scoring tiny circles in the parquet.

Adele settled herself down on the bed and waited to see what would happen next.

Carmen remained motionless until the click-clack of running high heels was no longer audible from the corridor outside. Then she stood up, wiped a hand across her damp eyes, and walked over to the bed.

For a second Adele was certain that she looked directly into her eyes.

'Thank you,' Carmen whispered, before climbing into bed and clicking back to *Project Runway*.

They were just in time to catch the climax. Both mouthed 'Auf Wiedersehen' in unison with Heidi Klum as the Israeli designer made a tearful departure, and at the exact same moment their hands found the remote and flicked over to *So You Think You Can Dance*.

Maybe, Adele thought, as she settled back into her pillow next to her friend, this was heaven, after all.

Crazy

Helen Walne

It's 5am and the boy with the breaking bones has just come in. I will have to pretend I'm not chain-smoking, and I won't be able to just sit, twirling my hair in my fingers, being lulled by the stutter of the heater beneath the yellowed-out window. He makes me feel like a fraud, with his scars and stitches and slings. He has a beautiful face and the torso of a swimmer, and I know he is an orphan and his only brother lives in America. One of the other girls told me. He is twenty-two and his bones are collapsing on him. In ten years, he had said, he will probably be dead.

I feign a yawn and flip through an out-of-date décor magazine. There are tips on how to set a summer lunch table, and people smile in front of houses. Everyone looks unfettered and expensively casual. They all have happy teeth.

In my dream last night, my teeth were tender and thin; a pair of geckos were living in my back molars, lodged there, waiting to grow. One was bigger than the other, and even in the murk of unconscious, I recognised the creatures as being you and me.

Then the little one exploded. I had felt it get hot. There was skin and bits of lizard all over the floor, and I gestured to someone to bring a glass of water so I could rinse out my mouth. Then someone removed the remaining gecko, and when it came out, it was flattened and grey. But it was alive. I am alive.

The boy is smoking and sitting, one bare, hairless leg stretched out on a chair in front of him. The small room feels too intimate to be sitting with a stranger, in my pyjamas. I've worn the same grey ones for five days now, and my body has become pale in them, the hair on my legs growing.

I get up, smile, make a weak joke about getting back to the excitement of bed, and leave the room, my mouth sour and ashy, the passage quiet except for a faint clattering and rustling from the kitchen. The gathering of trolleys.

As I pad past the nurse's station, I feel like an intruder, or a child who has woken too early on Christmas morning. The nurses are too busy to notice me. I don't feature in their routine. The fat one with the Irish accent is gossiping about someone, the air filled with 'she' that and 'she' this. I wonder what they think of us – the uninjured, the unable, lying in our bony beds with our limbs intact. I want to tell them I am not like the others. It wasn't that I couldn't cope with work, or that I panicked in a supermarket, or that my boyfriend dumped me. Something real happened to me. I am normally very happy.

The ward is dark and blank with the soundless slumber of my two inmates, the curtains around their beds drawn, impounding them in cream-coloured crypts.

Back down the passage, a nurse stacks plastic cups of pills on a trolley. She is chattering in her uniform. It's almost surreal to think that beyond these peach-coloured walls, people in their homes will be stirring, rolling over, choosing their uniforms for the day: stockings; scarves; chinos; ties; mini-skirts; pashminas.

There is nothing left to do but lie down, and I climb into the bed, wincing as it squeaks and the plastic-covered mattress crinkles. With my head turned to the side, I can make out the shape of a suitcase on the floor beneath the gap in the curtain.

The woman next to me had been admitted during the night. The nurses had snapped on the fluorescent lights, and there was a lot of curtain-shuffling and bustling. They had measured her blood pressure and filled in the forms – the same ones they had filled in when I was admitted. The nurse had asked me how many times I went to the toilet each day. 'Probably about fifteen,' I said, and her eyes had widened. I had laughed, and corrected it to 'once'. There is so much ambiguity in the world.

You never spoke in code. You made yourself perfectly clear. It was me who had listened in code. Hoping.

I had watched as the woman's thin legs flickered below the curtain. She told the nurses she weighed seventy-nine kilograms, and I had

thought she had surely got that wrong. Such thin ankles couldn't belong to someone that big. She said she thought she hadn't eaten in a week.

The woman in the bed next to the window had complained about the noise and the lights. Like most of us in this wing, she is here because she can't stop crying, and even visits from her two children can't dry up her eyes.

When the nurses had left, and the lights were extinguished, I could hear the woman next to me trying to get comfortable, could almost feel her eyes big and searching in the dark. I wondered who had brought her here.

I came here myself. The entrance had smelt like a hotel, and there were flowers and corporate blue upholstery. You would have scoffed at the extravagance of it. You would have made some remark about this not being a Woody Allen movie, about how the best cure for the blues can be found in a bar. You would have told me, again, to make my sickness my art. But you're not here now to mock me. And because of that, I am yellow inside. Turning violet.

Above me, in the gloom, the red light on the TV is still doing surveillance, taking in this curtained cubicle, documenting the books on the bedside table, the jug of water, the gifts of pot plants and chocolate. When people visit, I feel like a specimen in a petri dish, studied and looked-at, conscious that my drug-propped self may be slightly disappointing. There is no straitjacket, no cuts, no shaven head. My agar is too clean.

And when they talk, I barely listen. I don't trust my ears.

When you said you were going to do it, I twisted your words up and plugged them into my ears, blocking off the sound of you. Muffling your insistence. The night I came to sleep with you, we lay on your bed and you played me Tom Waits, the growling of his voice looking for a place to escape. The blinds on your windows flapped percussion. You played a song three times, and when I reached for your hand, I could feel we were out of tune. Your hand was limp in mine and your eyes searched the ceiling.

We didn't sleep that night. I had come straight from work, worried about you being alone, and had borrowed a pair of your sleeping shorts. Under the thin, white sheet, I was aware of my naked legs, aware of

yours. Two siblings keeping their distance – one ready for the end; the other holding on.

The woman in the next-door bed is shuffling and muttering about water. Something thuds to the floor. I part the curtain between us. She is old and black with a tired face. She smells of laundry. The wires of the headphones are tangled around her, and she is struggling to reach the jug.

‘Let me help,’ I say, bounding out of bed, leaning over her as she lies back on the pillow, a small smile on her face. She keeps thanking me. I untangle her, pour her a glass of water and adjust the blankets so they cover her feet. She thanks me again, but she doesn’t know how grateful I am. She doesn’t know that as I turn to climb back into my bed, I am happy I have helped. And I am happier she accepted it.

I did everything I could. I promised to go with you to the psychiatrist. I removed razors and knives from the house. I took you to a movie. I threatened to go on a hunger strike. But the only help you wanted was for me to let you go.

Restless and wide-eyed, I get up, sift through the pile of clothes on the floor, grab my towel, and head for the bathroom, with its foreign piles of toiletries. I clean and re-clean my teeth, scrubbing away the pre-dawn cigarettes, knowing dozens more will come. I step quietly into the shower, and the routine of shampooing and cleansing is comforting. Here, we only shower to prove a semblance of normality. Today, I will not be donning work clothes, going into the office, writing headlines, meeting deadlines. In this paused bubble, our days are measured by the pots of pills doled out at regular intervals. The time in between is a surreal haze of meals and murmurings, group therapy and bead-making. We are like babies, fed and put to bed.

In the mirror, I am smaller than I remember and my glasses look too big for my face. When I lean closer to apply moisturiser, my eyes are familiar. They are your eyes – the same dark blue, the same wariness in the corners. People always said we looked like twins.

* * *

At high school, we hatched a plan to swop uniforms and schools, and spend a day in each other's skin. We were inseparable. We walked miles to the farm dam and fished for bulrushes. We got so dehydrated we drank the green water. I rode on the back of your motorbike, whooping when you ramped over the manure pile. I cleaned your wounds when you fell off. We stripped a telephone and pulled out its guts, wiring up the two receivers so we could whisper to each other from our bedrooms at night. You even forgave me when I tried out my hairdressing skills on you, cutting a huge divot in the back of your head and then colouring in the exposed scalp with mascara.

When we grew up and went out drinking, beer-blurred men would slap you on the back and make jokes about incest. But we didn't mind. You were my best friend.

The day before you left, we had coffee in town and you said how much you liked the cappuccinos. Then you kissed me all over my left cheek, and as you walked away I could still feel the wetness and wondered whether I should keep my face unwashed. I knew I might not see you again.

* * *

I am first at the breakfast table. The nurses won't bring meals to our beds. It is apparently good for us to interact. The walls of the dining room are stuck with inspirational quotes on handwritten posters. 'Each moment is a precious gift.' Some are decorated with stickers of flowers and butterflies, like a pre-school classroom. The table is set for seven, and one of the apples in the fruit bowl has a bruise.

I am not hungry here and always leave most of my food untouched. It's as though I won't eat if you can't eat. On the Wednesday before you went, you brought me lunch to work. I told you I had never had radish sandwiches before, and you laughed and said I should try them. They were delicious.

Slowly, the others trickle in: the chatty girl with the curly hair; the large Danish girl with piercings; the quiet redhead; the sad-eyed mother; my crumpled room-mate; and the man. We are no longer suspicious of one another – we have opened up and shut down together. We have perched on the ends of each other's beds, watching action movies on TV, chewing on delivered pizzas. We have assembled our pots of pills and

taken pictures of the gaudy pellets. We have smoked endless cigarettes on the cold balcony, huddled on wet chairs, and we have babbled on pharmaceuticals. We have been together in our pyjamas. I have told them about you.

The curly-haired girl is prodding her porridge and making us laugh. She always makes us laugh, and sometimes I wonder what she is doing here. The pierced girl ladles a teabag out of her cup, frowning under her pillow-puffed hair. I want to ask her about the scars on her arms. I want to know how it feels to want to die.

People told the police they had seen you sitting on the rocks, reading a book and smoking roll-ups. I found the book in your backpack. I had bought it for you because there was an accordion on the cover. I thought you might stay for a good story. We know you drank from your silver flask. That was also in your bag, along with your old blue towel. By the time we got it, the liquid in the flask had gone rotten, and I hoped there had been pills in it. I hope you weren't awake when you went under.

For months, I had wanted to know what the sea temperature had been that day. I wanted to know that the water was blue and smooth, and that the kelp welcomed you into its furling arms.

You had told me you didn't want to get old. How you were thirty-nine, had had a good life and didn't want to risk messing it up. You also told me how there were things I didn't know about you, and how you had started noticing birds. They were the only things that made sense. I said there would be no birds where you were going. No coffee shops, no sky, no beautiful waitresses, no music, no Dostoevsky, no dogs, no cigarettes, no family. No me. You shrugged and said that was fine.

Ten days before you went, I wrote a eulogy for you. You were still alive, tossing in the bed in our guest room, rubbing your feet together. I wrote down all the things I would remember about you: the rustling of your tobacco paper as you rolled your Half Zware; your mouth, turned down, cut into your face; walking next to your black jeans past the Bird Café, the two smoking tramps, up the steep cobbled path to your house, with its government windows and given plants; your red face as you sat frowning at the work computer, trying to make your shoulders disappear. How startled I was to see your only two pairs of shoes lying next to the futon I had lent you, realising how small your feet were. Sitting with you in the cinema, me in your green Mushav jersey, you

digging into the popcorn, greedy with too much vinegar salt. How we laughed at the ornaments on the wall, imagining they were chalices for people to piss into. The advert for a car that drives underwater, with the disclaimer 'Do not drive your car underwater'. Your purple lunchbox sticky-taped together filled with the rusks I brought you.

I was making an inventory of you. Lest I forgot.

The nurse brings the tray of pills into the dining room. The plastic pots have our names on them. Our wristbands have our names on them. I finger mine. It is white and damp from the shower and feels like ones I have worn to music festivals. It is a backstage pass to another world – one that demands nothing and allows us to fall apart.

I haven't fallen apart here. Even when I was at the mortuary, staring through the glass at your face, the hospital tubes still in your nostrils, I kept myself intact. Even after your first attempt, I methodically collected your shampoo and pyjamas and took them to the hospital, and sat next to you while the machines pumped and beeped. When you discharged yourself and came to stay, still looking at birds, I made you tea and ran your bath. It was only when the world turned silent a few months after you were gone, that I unraveled and frayed, lay awake and grew ragged.

After breakfast, we slink on to the balcony. The redheaded girl is wearing striped flannel pyjamas, and even though she doesn't smoke, she perches on the end of the bench and gazes out towards the mountain. The curly-haired girl offers me a light and we all lean together, able to recognize the weariness around each other's eyes; the collapsed posture of those who have almost given up. Our slippers get wet in the puddles that have pooled overnight, but we don't mind. The world's small workings – the gear-changing of daily life – have been stripped away, and we are left picked clean, the bone of our beings as smooth as ice.

Across the city, the mist is clearing off the mountain. Cars on the road below splash their tyres around the corner. A chunk of rock pokes through the clouds like honeycomb, and for a minute, the mountain is there again, unchanging and solid, witnessing the swirling around it.

I picture you with your dog at your heels, your hardened guitar fingers peeling a naartjie, and for a brief minute, I smile. Sometimes it's all so clear. The human world swirled around you, and you stood, broad feet planted, unbending.

I smoke and watch the window of a private room on the far side of the balcony. I had walked past the room the day before, and through a gap in the door, had caught a glimpse of an old, powdery woman rasping and rattling as the machines pressed and pistoned. A bored nurse had sat on a chair next to the bed, picking her nails.

Now I can see the nurse moving around the room, plumping up pillows and flapping out a blanket. And as if on cue, a scattering of homing pigeons flutters up above the balcony, their white bodies flashing like drifting litter in a burst of sunlight, and suddenly I am whole again. The drugs are kicking in, and the curly-haired girl lets out a peal of laughter.

Hunters and Lovers

Nia Magoulianiti-McGregor

Do you love your wife?

Yes.

Why are you fucking me then?

I don't know, I can't answer that. I think it's about seizing the moment.

I don't like that. Seizing the moment is pretty unthought out as an excuse. It's too me-generation. Too locked in the 80's. University. Talking Heads. Black Ray-Bans. Dagga smoke and mirrors and Sociology I. No, I suppose for him it was Business Admin and Depeche Mode. Maybe he drove a second hand car then, but unlikely. More likely he drove the chemistry or first year law girls wild with the promise of success. So squeaky clean. He must have worn ironed shirts while all around him people were losing theirs. No political boycotts for him. Just head down, the big picture in view. Money, status, buy, buy, sell, sell ... And yet ... He gives me something I haven't even identified I want. What is it? Love? No. But something. Intensity? Intimacy? A challenge?

Here's how it started:

We're at a party. I must go. 'No stay,' he says. His Pringle sweater is hanging casually over his shoulders. He's caressing a short, fat glass of Blue with long, white fingers. One of them wears a thick gold wedding band that winks at me when the light catches it. He's smiling a lot, being congenial, laughing at my jokes. His watch is a masterpiece as much as a time piece. I'm being flirty, attentive, funny, self-deprecating. Gets them every time.

He looks benign, but doesn't miss a trick. When my cigarette is finished, he takes it out of my hand and flicks into the fire coolly – it's almost a

parody. Like a jock scoring a try. Clap clap. When a piece of hair falls over my eye (entirely planned), he brushes it away without missing a beat, saying something both silly and clever. I think it's something about American politics but I hate watching the news these days so I have to wing it a bit. He's playing cool, but you can't bullshit a bullshitter – he's in hot pursuit. He chats to everyone around but doesn't let me out his sight, he has some emotional itch to scratch, I'm sure of it, some longing, a yearning, even if it's only for a huge ego stroke. He lightly touches my neck while I'm fiddling with my car door to leave. Feels good, self-assured.

He's married. Don't do this!

Just for one night ...

One night doesn't excuse anything. It's unethical. How would you like it if some other woman did this to you?

It's just one night. Society has always absorbed this.

You can't avoid real intimacy forever.

He follows me in his car. We slip into a game of follow-the-leader. A slow purposeful tease of withdrawal and capitulation depending on who slows down and who speeds up. He's behind the wheel of a fancy sports number, top down even in the dead of night in Joburg with murderers and robbers and whores in Oxford Street just longing to have their way with him. But he knows it looks good, and he's about to have his way with me. He moves on the wrong side of road for a split second and points his finger at me. It looks like a gun. Bang bang, you're dead. No, the bullet didn't hit me. Laughing in the face of danger. It makes me smile. He thinks he's impressing me. I'm in a hatchback. But I like driving. And I like him following behind me. We're already in some sort of sexual position.

Remember that line I read recently about Artemis, Greek Goddess of Hunting: 'Over the shadowy hills and windy peaks she draws her golden bow ...'

Red light stop. I peer into my rear view mirror to take another look at him to see if I'm doing the right thing. Am I being hasty leading him home? I've just met him. Haven't done this for awhile but it's just like

riding a bike! I'd forgotten what fun it is. Just lay a trap of lipstick and laughs. Use Wonder Woman's magic lasso and a smooth tongue to reel him in gently. Don't forget some body glitter mingled with the almost imperceptible whiff of ready pussy.

It's been so long. Now I'm the cat who's about to get the cream. I'm free-wheeling Isadora Duncan (before she dies so horribly), throaty Marlene Dietrich doing Lili Marlene. I'm Marilyn Monroe singing 'Happy Birthday, Mr President'. Nigella licking her spoon. Winding through one ways and detours in the dead of night. If there were tunnels it would be Freudian. Still, his headlights are prodding me from behind. Slowing down when I do. Getting closer, pulling away. I'm wearing the smile of near-victory. I'm driving with one hand. For a minute, I don't see him when we turn a corner. I think he's changed his mind, and the relief when I see his headlights again makes me catch my breath. Just for that, I speed up.

He takes off his shirt neatly. He actually hangs it up! He folds his pants. A bad mark. Wonder what the state of my kitchen sink would do to his libido! He must be a Virgo. Damn. I throw my bra on the floor, just to test him. How obsessive compulsive is he really? He ignores it.

He's showing too much order already! You know what that means, internal chaos.

Maybe he's just tidy or anxious! Maybe he really is a Virgo.

Oh come on!

So I put on some middle of the road music. Cesara Evora or something. Cool enough to be interesting but not threatening. He kisses my neck, and puts his finger slowly in my mouth. It tastes of cigarette and whiskey and the sushi he's been eating. I'm slurping salmon nigiri and teppenyaki. Sesame seeds and wasabi. Sucking on each finger obediently but greedily like a Geisha who's lost her manners. He feeds me puffs of cigarette and moves us in front of the mirror so we can both see everything. I think then that the best kind of encounter leads nowhere. Is in and of itself. Knowing I will never see him again is hugely liberating.

The bed is hard and containing. It carries us both. He kisses me for hours until thoughts of hunted or hunter have melted away somewhere. He touches my face, my neck, my inner thighs. The whole dynamic is

different to what I expected. There's no rush. It seems we have all the time in the world.

He looks me straight in the eyes. Where did he learn to do that? There is no room for subterfuge. I force myself to look back. It's like looking in the mirror and finally finding yourself looking back at you. I'm not bullshitting any more.

You mean about the Narcissism!

I know this is corny. (Forgive me). But it's a knowing. The perfection of a magical moment when you are no longer alone in the world. Just for a second, you have made a connection. There is no other. You are finally fused. Back to the womb, when there is no separateness. Before the sexes were separated by the gods, they were one, says a Greek tale. And now we spend our lives looking for the other matching half. When you will belong fully. Where you never have to say goodbye and wait, long for them to come home. No abandonment, yet no engulfment. The perfect optimum distance. I call him baby. I caress his leg. I kiss him. He takes ages to come. I don't mind. No hurry. There is no threat. He's going to go back home to her tomorrow.

'Should we see each other again?'

I don't know.

He's married. He's damn well married.

I wait desperately for him to call me. I check the phone every minute. Is it charged? Did I write my email address down for him correctly? Check the phone, check the phone, check the email, check the phone. Check the runes. Check my horoscope and his. Check the tarot: Two of wands: new love coming. Knight of wands: someone going to enter or leave your life in a hurry. Check the pendulum. Does he think of me? Circular clockwise motion. Yes! Does he miss me? Circular clockwise motion. Yes! I make my friend read the cards. Cartomancy. Magic. Crystal balls. Red candles for love. Incense for atmosphere. She sees nothing. She doesn't know what she's looking for. He has my number. He took it. Use it, please, please use it. Come on! Will him to use it.

Could he have forgotten? Perhaps regretted the night?

Maybe he's buying her presents: Underwear or bone china or making reparations by cooking her fluffy omelettes. Or kissing her like he kissed me? Maybe he has made a pact with God: Forgive me and I'll never contact her again. I'm going to work even harder to make my wife very, very happy. See how happy she's going to be with a bigger car, a better house, a longer holiday, more designer clothes for the kids. I'm going to listen to her more and even take her needs into account. It was a mistake. A big, bad one.

Maybe he lied, maybe he does this all the time. He's been back in her bed for days. How soon did he wait before fucking her? Did he wait? Can he still smell me on him? Can she?

She's probably a little overweight.

Why should she be?

Well, her vagina must be stretched then. She's probably got stretch marks. She's had two natural births.

He calls. Just as I am about to give up hope. I'm so nonchalant and light. The way men like us best. Chit chat chit chat, laugh giggle laugh. Low laugh. High laugh. Small small talk talk. He laughs. Thousand trumpets blowing, glowing, oh yes. Chit-chat. No reference to last week. When he was here. In my bed. In me. Inside I say a silent thank you. Outside, keep it going, keep him talking.

'How was your flight?'

'It was good, I had a lot to think about.'

He visits me next time he's in town. He kisses me for hours, on my lips and my neck and, when I open my mouth just a little bit, puts his finger on my lips, in my mouth again. In, everywhere. The sweet taste of success. Every woman should have a night like that, even just once in her life. He visits me every night that week.

'Do you love your wife?'

'Yes.'

'Why are you fucking me then?'

'I don't know, I can't answer that. I think it's about seizing the moment.'

Leave now. He's using you.

I like being used.

It's easier to walk away now. This is how married men stay in bad marriages. How they pretend they're happy. They find outlets.

I move away to light a fire even though it's not that cold inside. I have a fireplace in my room which he loves. I look at him lying there, naked, so at home. He has a body that few men have at his age.

But I suppose keeping up with the Joneses is not for the weak. It must all be hard work: Golfing, sizing up the competition, down-sizing. See him take pro-biotics, cosmoceuticals, Omega 3's, vitamins. One glass of red wine to ward off the dangers of the fat Coimbra. No lying about in bed on a Sunday. Off for a 10 km run. Hikes and yachting and watching the carbs and, even occasionally, playing soccer with the kids on the lawn. Look, darling, look at junior score a goal. Aren't I a good father? A wonderful husband. A fine specimen. A scion of the bourgeoisie.

Later, I watch him as he sleeps. Trying to memorise every part of his face so I can remember him when he goes back to her.

When he leaves me, for home, for her, I think about his finger in my mouth. That he calls me baby. Only in bed though. Never out. Out we pretend this is nothing. No big deal. We'll just see each other for as long as it lasts, just when he comes to town on business trips. I'm used to this. I was single for years. Topped up my numbers yearly. Inured to true love. Taught by those Betty Friedans and Gloria Steinems to have sex without feelings, encouraged to have 'open' relationships. No property. Everyone so free and easy. Outwardly.

What is she like? Rolls on her back and a cut-glass accent. Too much tasting of the children's food. Come darlings, here, have some more egg. Oh, it tastes so good. See mummy tasting your food. Sip the juice. See mummy have some wine over lunch to make the day go quicker. Oh yummy. Doesn't work much. Wonders about what to buy for supper. Takes in an afternoon movie as long as it's arty. Wanders through the malls vacantly. Buy, buy. Phones friends. SMSs. Buys more decorating magazines. Calls children: 'Are you alright darlings? Mummy's coming home in a little while.' Calls Mum. Has highlights at the hairdresser. Bikini waxes. Botox. Boasts about her successful husband. Her creative, clever, clever children.

All is well, here in the burbs. We do the right thing. Send thank you notes. Jump up straight after morning sex, saying it's okay, we don't need

an orgasm right now sweetie as long as you're satisfied. Sometimes fake it with a light touch of his balls to get it over quickly to make Pilates. Invite couples who've had us over twice already for drinks and dinner. We do school plays and stab outsiders in the back and take some pleasure when our friends' children get into drugs and worry about 'single' friends who can just not 'find someone.' We plump up our thin lips with Restylane and hope he doesn't kiss us.

His business meetings increase. We laugh about their new frequency. He wants to hear what I'm feeling. I run out of descriptions.

'How hard am I?'

'Very.'

'Tell me more.'

'Like a steel rod.'

He makes very little sound when he comes. Maybe she shushes him:

'Don't wake the children ...'

A few times later, when he lets out a tiny little moan, I know he's falling for me too.

I start waking up to thoughts of him. Even, especially, when he's back home. What's he's doing. Is he fucking her? She starts taking over my head, sometimes with him, sometimes alone. Can she cook? Does she wear high shoes or tan slip-on yachting shoes? Lacy black lingerie or white cotton? Cashmere and pearls or understated nothing.

I pretend to my friends that I fancy this one and that one but they are all red herrings. No one can compete with Bat Man, the Fantastic Four in one. Superman. (Is he plain old Clarke Kent to her?) To me he's the Incredible Hulk, Spider Man, best of all, Married Man: look at all his powers. Married man can fly. Can swoop in, see through you, through me. Be strong. Save the day. Arrive in the nick of time. Make me happy. I'm Ms Lois Lane. Only I can know who he is. His true identity. It's a big secret. Dark and powerful.

It all makes for a very hard act to follow. Ironically, he feels stable and safer than any other man I've known. He feels dependable, and (don't laugh) honest and caring.

I said don't laugh!

I feel up when he calls. Irritable or depressed when he doesn't. He's got soft skin. When he's tired, when it's five in the morning and we've finished off a bottle of eighteen-year old whiskey, smoked half a pack of cigarettes, he gets bags under his eyes and looks even more beautiful, a bit more fragile, vulnerable but beautiful. Does she know what she's got? Does she bitch at him? He can talk about anything, well, except his feelings maybe. Does that irritate her a bit too?

'You'd better go ...'

'I know ... this is the hardest part. Leaving.'

I wait for his calls. Worry he'll change his mind. That the guilt may take over and he'll say well, this has been amazing but I can't do this any more. I forget about no committal sex. I am deep in the shit. In the middle of a cliché. I check the stock market to see if he'll be happy that day, my horoscope to see if I will be. He can't come to a dinner I'm having even though he's in town and I'm having friends over. I can't wait for them to leave.

Later, he's tickling my belly button. We're both naked. Santana is playing in the background. We've drunk too much. I can hardly open my eyes. In case he sees how much I want him. Yes. Love him.

'Is this wrong?'

'I suppose it's not the best thing we're doing ... but you know we're not getting younger. We don't want to live with regrets. We're careful. We use condoms. So, no no, we're not really doing the wrong thing, just living life to the full, grabbing it by the balls, not living with regrets, what she doesn't know, can't hurt her.'

Except she is starting to hurt me. But I say quickly: 'Yes, you're right. Of course we're not hurting anyone as long as no one finds out. And absolutely life is short, does anyone know when it'll all be over and we'll be bodiless circles of energy and you know what they say, people on their deathbed regret what they didn't do rather than what they did do.'

I start using that word – the affair word – mainly in my head, but occasionally in my conversation with him. It formalizes it all. Neither of us is pretending this is ad hoc anymore. That we'll stop this soon, 'any moment now'. As soon as one of us wants to. I take out movies to watch when he's not around: *An Affair to Remember*. *Casablanca*. *Bridges of Madison County* ... I am as tortured and hooked as a girl can be. I

am a mistress. A lover. The perfect mistress. I never ask about her. But when he mentions her name casually, I listen intently, looking for clues. Who am I up against? Supergirl or tortured Spider Woman? Veronica or sweet Betty? Good Charlotte or bad Samantha? Boadicea? Bitch? Babe? Ball-breaker?

*They're all formidable in their own way.
I'm not underestimating anyone here.*

We're in a five star hotel, the kind where you could be anywhere in the world with heavy curtains where you dive on the bed and look around and think this is how a kid feels in Disney Land and where they make the bed so tight you have to fight, kicking and screaming, to find and move your feet.

It's the first time I'm with him on a business trip overseas. We are zonked from the time difference, all the whiskey, the sweat, the kisses, the smell of his spunk, me, the cigarettes, the massage oil which is meant to be fragrance free but has got mixed up with all the raw body smells.

'I don't get this at home', he says as I pour ice cubes from the whiskey on him and suck the liquid off.

Oh I know I know.

Oh, I hope not.

His phone rings. We both freeze. I've got a bruise on my bum and love bites on my neck. He's still hard. I panic too. It must be her. Does he take the call?

I make it easy for him and lean over to take another sip of whiskey.

He whispers into the phone. I pretend not to listen. I can almost hear her voice. Soft and modulated. Like a night-time radio announcer who needs to be sexy and in command simultaneously. He walks into the bathroom. He tells her it's the middle of the night there that he's tired. No, no, he hasn't been drinking. But he doesn't ask why she's calling at that time.

Perhaps she still loves him?

Well. Maybe. Perhaps she just doesn't want to lose him.

Lose him and she's lost the family holidays in quaint beach towns, overseas trips on trendy air-conditioned clippers, someone to call to buy

milk on the way home, companion, lover, father, banker all in a heart beat. He works to keep her lifestyle. He schleps the kids. Doesn't matter he probably irritates her when he's disagreeable. He can be a bit of a know all. A giver of charity. One of those men who need to help others. He's sometimes a bit smug too. He calls his friends by their surnames like they did in boarding school.

And her? He chose her after all. I imagine her meeting her friends for breakfast in expensive sunglasses and Dior lip gloss and to be really rebellious when she's cross she may sneak a cigarette with a friend over tea. Maybe she kissed someone once at the beginning of their relationship and worries she has sullied things. I can almost hear her open up to her friends.

'I think he's having an affair.'

'No, he's not the type!'

'Yes, but there's something different ... maybe it's my imagination. You know last night he actually tried to spank me in bed!'

Gasp.

'Maybe he's just trying to spice things up!'

'Maybe ...'

Still, no way is she giving up all of that, she's made peace with gluttony and the guilt of gluttony, and having babies and making him work hard to meet her aspirations, make her content, maybe happy, be nice to her parents and tennis partners, buy the big house and the bigger four-by-fours, all those years going up, up, up in the world. No, she's just calling to put him on his toes. To make sure that if he is still straying, he doesn't slip up again. Unless she's really upset? No ... It's probably to warn him to be extra vigilant so that no one has to confront anything. If he suspects she may suspect, the SMSs will be deleted, the credit card slips discarded. That way, everyone gets what they want.

Do I?

Well. Do you?

I don't know anymore. Maybe he is getting the best of both worlds?

It turns out she's not fat nor has rolls on her back even nor is anything like I imagined. I need to tip room service while he's in the shower the next morning.

'Get some change out my wallet ...'

Instead, I frantically look for a picture of her. My heart is beating wildly. I can hardly control my breathing. I am an art thief uncovering a masterpiece. A cat burglar on a stealth mission.

She's blonde and lovely with Scarlett Johansson lips painted orange. Her eyes are brown and big and they're looking into the distance as if she's listening to some song that reminds her of someone far away, something beautiful like Lara's Theme or the theme song from The Godfather, all about love lasting until we all die. She's wearing a low cut top and has big breasts. How does he touch them? How does she like it?

Maybe I'm wrong about everything, maybe she advises him about his work, maybe he relies on her, maybe he puts his finger in her mouth. Maybe he says to her: I love you, do you love me and she says, yes I love you, touch me here ...

'Do you love me?'

'Yes, I love you.'

'Leave her for me.'

'No, I can't. I can't do that to her.'

Leave her for me. Come live with me.

I argue, and plead and make threats and demands. He's reeling. He reels from one fuck to the next. I am Anne Boleyn keeping the King hanging sexually until he marries her, then I am Lucrecia Borgia, poisoned and spitting venom, then Madonna, sexual and demanding and in command, but mostly I'm Snow White, vulnerable and meek, doing his every bidding.

How did you go from being Ms Liberated Woman to Missus Psycho?

It's just a strategy to unnerve the prey. Women do it all the time.

I love the muscles in his bum as he crouches to put another log in the fireplace. He's moved in. He has left her and moved in!

He loves my chaise longue which I lie on naked when I talk to him as he's lying on my bed. He showers naked under the outside shower on my balcony. The crimson Bougainvilleas brighten up the cracked walls. It's kind of a Bohemian boudoir. I play music and light vanilla candles when we fuck. He calls it 'making love'. He's brought nothing. Just a laptop, some boy creams, shaving lotion, deodorant. That kind of thing. He is a social pariah except among other husbands in the midst of a mid-life crisis who look at him adoringly. He is their hero. Divorced Man.

Menopause Man. With a woman who can't get enough of him. He has the life they wish they were leading. They are still with the wicked witch. He is with Cinderella. Sleeping Beauty. Snow White.

They are as stupid as he is.

Well, you know men like to split good and evil. Madonna or Whore. They don't like to think it's in the same package.

I'm sure my house is different to hers. More chaotic. Shambolic. How does she decorate? Does he like her style? Sometimes I think about her lips or her breasts when his hands are on me. Are they real? How authentic is she?

I flick my head so that my hair falls in my eyes, but one day he doesn't wipe it away. He pours another whiskey and reads the business section instead. I'm cross at being ignored and I show it. We have a fight, 'It's a lover's tiff,' he laughs. We both laugh. Our first fight since he's moved in.

We try everything he's wanted to try (but she wouldn't allow?). I indulge his every fantasy, and he indulges some of mine too. We eat in bed, watch TV in bed. Kiss in bed. Sometimes argue there too. He works in bed, buy, buy, sell, sell while I play with his tummy and run my tongue up his thigh.

'Do you love me?'

'Yes. I told you ...'

'Are you glad you're here with me?'

'Yes ...'

Do you still think of her? Of home? Do you miss your life? I don't ask that. I don't want to know. They were together for a very long time.

But his kids don't speak to him. And he works hard. One day he says he needs to watch TV tonight. Not porn, we'll watch the news, there's something important on. He starts kissing me less and tells me the kitchen can do with a washing up. He has a business trip to plan. I'm not invited – 'I'll be running around too much.' He asks me to please pick up my towels off the floor.

'You know we should stop drinking so much, it's just not healthy,' he says.

'You said eighteen-year-old whiskey was healthy.'

'Not on a long term basis.'

He stops putting his finger in my mouth.

'You smoke too much, baby.'

'You work too much.'

'Well, I need to support two households now.'

It gets worse. He also supports conservative politicians. He likes to switch on the radio and listen to the news first thing in the morning. It seems there is a 'right way' to do things and a wrong way – even with something as mild as frying eggs or onions. He fries his brain on the cellphone. He leaves his fancy car keys lying around the place and can't ever find them without getting me to help look for them. He works late.

'Put your finger in my mouth.'

'No, I have to get up early in the morning. Go to bed'.

No, you go to bed. You've got bags under your eyes. They make you look old.

One night, months later, when he's away on yet another business trip, I go to a party. I meet her there. She's with a new man who hangs on her every word. Or maybe he's someone who's been around for awhile? She looks beautiful and engaging. Her blonde hair curls on her shoulders.

We walk outside. I grab a bottle of Cristal along the way and nervously listen to it slosh into crystal glasses. I drop some on her and try and wipe it off. For a moment our fingers touch and I spill a bit more.

We laugh. She sounds throaty. She takes a puff of my cigarette and crushes it under her red heel. I am forgiven. 'Maybe it was a wake up call, we were getting stale. I was home alone so often. He was always busy.'

'I'm sorry, I didn't think about you.'

'Didn't you?'

No, actually I thought about you a lot.

She looks me straight in the eye and follows me to my car. She takes the keys from my hand and slowly, very slowly, she puts a finger in my mouth. It tastes of cigarette and whiskey and woman. A woman who's been living in my head, in my bed, in my space, for months now.

I seem to remember him saying something about seizing the moment.

Oh yes, I believe he did!

On a Broomstick

Liesl Jobson

Rina stares at the liver spots on the back of her hands. The darkened patches are the same chocolatey colour as the thread she is using to adjust her husband's cummerbund. The brown is not ideal against the black fabric, but she doesn't have time to buy more black thread now and she reasons that the stitches will be concealed. It's not as if he'll be dancing.

Boeta, her six-year-old, cocks his head, then snips the length of thread with the scissors, like a precise and delicate bird.

'Thanks, son,' she says.

'When can I help you again?' he asks as he hops from one foot to the other, waving the scissors about.

'As soon as I've finished this stitching you can snip the thread,' she says. She enfolds the small hand containing the scissors and prises them away gently. The last time Jacques wore his dinner jacket was at his retirement function, which coincided with the twins' twenty-first birthday. He had decided to celebrate the double event in style. 'Not too shabby,' he'd said as they drove down the tree-lined entrance to the Mount Nelson Hotel where the festivities took place. The event brought relatives together from around the country – and it took nine months to settle the credit card bill.

Jacques had looked like a wildebeest that night. His great mop of hair, which shook when he laughed, had been silver-grey, streaked with brown, and his skin was radiant and tanned. He'd twirled her around the dance floor, his hand firm in the small of her back and said, 'If I was twenty-one again, I'd marry you all over again.' She was glad he didn't ask her, 'Would you?'

How long ago was that? A year? Eighteen months? She couldn't figure it out.

Now his dinner jacket is three sizes too big and his head is bald. He shaved off his hair before it fell out, saying he was perfecting coolth, like Koos and Danie.

'Gotta go the whole way, Pops. Get the body piercings too,' said Koos. She knew it was an attempt at humour, to smooth over the gruesome truth, but she hadn't even tried to laugh.

The twins' body piercings had been a sore point. The boys had dared each other over too many beers at The Junkyard one February afternoon when the waves at Muizenberg were too calm to surf and the sand shimmered in the heat. While they should have been sitting in a first year engineering lecture hall they were picking out barbells and learning how to keep their wounds clean. When they returned home that evening, Danie's tongue was too swollen to eat and he lisped when he spoke. Koos kept prodding the silver stud perched above his eyebrow.

'You didn't go to some backyard operation, did you?' asked their mother.

'Hell, no! We did it ourselves,' said Koos.

Rina clucked her tongue; Jacques laughed.

'Ag, Ma, we went to Kippie's Paleis,' said Koos, patting her on the shoulder. She shrugged off his hand. 'It's legit. They used sterile needles and stuff. I watched them open new packets in front of us. We won't get AIDS or anything.'

'Guess you don't want to see where else we got body art ...' said Koos, reaching for his belt buckle. Danie backhanded his brother and said, 'Don't talk shit, Koos-face.' The boys lurched, raucous with laughter and Amstel, but Rina had paled.

'That's neither clever nor funny,' she said, flushing with anger. Indeed she did not want to think about what her sons might do with or to their members.

Jacques had stroked her hand across the table, saying, 'Poppie, don't sweat the small stuff. Life's mighty short.'

Rina pulled her hand away, saying, 'You don't have to encourage their irresponsibility, Jacques.'

Shortly thereafter Jacques began to limp. He'd twist and turn at night, unable to get comfortable, wrestling the duvet, fighting the pillows. She listened to him sighing in the dark, pretending sleep. She wondered, but only briefly, if he was having an affair.

She remembers now how he'd grunted as he took his place at the Sunday dinner table, manoeuvring into the heavy chair with difficulty.

'Too much golf?' said Rina, serving roast potatoes.

'Too much retirement,' said Jacques, with a note of false jollity. He poured a glass of Meerendal Cabochon, swirling the wine around in the glass and inhaling deeply. 'I should probably lay off this stuff!'

'You think you may have gout?' Rina asked, setting the last plate down in front of him and taking her seat.

'Toppie raak oud,' said Koos.

'Toppie! Toppie!' said Boeta reaching for a potato with his fingers.

Rina frowned at Koos and said to Boeta, 'Wait for grace.' They held hands and Jacques gave thanks for health and wealth, family and fellowship.

'Mmmm ... Can you smell liquorice and mocha?' said Jacques, holding his wine glass under his nose.

Koos flared his nostrils, sniffed noisily and said in a professorial tone, 'I detect I do believe ... a hint of ... farm yard!'

Boeta giggled.

'Old boots and appiefies,' said Danie. 'What can you smell, Ma?'

'Nothing,' said Rina, not even reaching for her glass. She'd flavoured the lamb with garlic and rosemary.

'Ag, come on, Poppie,' said Jacques. He reached over to pinch her cheek but winced at the exertion. She sniffed the wine and scowled, saying she couldn't smell a thing. Throughout the meal he shifted in his seat, as if eager to be somewhere else.

After dessert, which Jacques hardly touched, they lay together on their bed. Jacques was in too much pain for their ritual lovemaking. Rina recalled the previous time he'd become edgy and restive. She'd been eight months pregnant with Boeta when she realised the meaning of his far-away look. She hadn't wanted to acknowledge it, had ignored the clues. She discovered coarse red hairs clinging to the fibres of his suits and jumpers. She wondered about the owner of the long and curly red hair. She wondered which was worse, a no-strings prostitute or a twenty-year-old in the typing pool eager to bag a wealthy husband? She suspected the latter judging by his inattention, the lightness of his step, but didn't have the nerve to ask. She'd held up the evidence, saying she

damn well hoped he was being careful. Their laatlammetjie didn't need a mother with AIDS, didn't need a bastard sibling either.

He'd hung his head in shame, hadn't tried to explain, but a week later, when Rina's blood pressure rocketed and Boeta was delivered three weeks early by emergency caesarean, Jacques' focus returned. He visited Rina in hospital, bringing flowers and gifts. He cradled the tiny bundled infant against his chest, sleeping in the easy chair beside her. After their discharge, he hovered over Rina, soothing her, preparing meals and measuring out the formula into carefully sterilised bottles. He got up for the baby at night and changed nappies. They never discussed his infidelity again. As far as she could tell it was his sole excursion.

'Doesn't gout usually start in the big toe?'

He wiggled his toes in his socks and sighed. 'They're fine.'

'Perhaps you should get Dr Louw to take a look at it?'

Jacques face twisted and he said, 'Nah, I'll just take a couple of Disprin. I'll be right as rain in a day.'

Rina got up to fetch him a glass of water. He tore open the foil strip and swallowed with a gulp. 'At least go to the physio,' she said. He'd gone for a series of treatments for a few weeks but it hadn't made much difference. She didn't press him.

* * *

Jacques is at the Karl Bremer Hospital. He went in for another treatment yesterday and collapsed. She had watched Koos reverse the car right to the front of the house, and Danie had held his father's elbow, assisting him down the stairs. They had insisted on taking him, even though Rina had said she would. Jacques told her to stay with Boeta; he said, 'Kleinboer needs you.' She let them go alone, figuring the twins needed time with their father.

* * *

'I had a dream, Ma,' says Boeta, pressing his Harry Potter figurine onto a miniature Lego broomstick while Rina unpicks the Velcro from Jacques' cummerbund.

'Ja?'

'I dreamed I was playing quidditch with Pa and Harry Potter. I was behind Pa on our broomstick. We bliksemmed Harry good.'

'That's nice.' Rina stares over the top of her glasses, smoothing out the snarl in the thread as it drags through the pleated silk. She has resisted getting bifocals. It is too soon to be old. She will be fifty next month.

Boeta swoops around the kitchen, mimicking the flight path of the dream broomstick. He stops to take a naartjie but picks up the package of DriNites the Hospice visitor had placed on the counter. 'What means die-ape-err?' he asks.

'Diaper,' she stalls, 'is an American word.' Rina has avoided discussing Jacques' illness with Boeta.

'Disneyland is in America. What's a diaper?'

'Nappies for grown ups. Pa needs them because he can't get to the toilet quick-sticks, and it's not lekker to have an oepsy.'

'He needs a broomstick to fly there. *Wingardiam leviosa!* That's a spell to make things fly. I know lots of spells.'

'That's fine, but don't say them in front of Tannie Marie, okay? It's a secret.'

'Ja, Ma,' he says in the sing-song voice of inattention.

'Please. It's important.' Rina's sister runs the Finger of God Coffee Bar and Home Bake. She sells bags of rusks and pot holders with 'Bless this mess' embroidered in cross stitch. She plays 'Oh the Blood of Jesus' in a continuous loop over the speakers to prevent the lesser demons from invading her shop. She refuses to bake Pokemon or Harry Potter birthday cakes for her clients. Pamphlets about true redemption are freely available on the tables and at the counter.

'Diaper.' Boeta traces the letters on the package, sounding out the foreign word.

'You know Pa is terribly sick ...'

'Pa's getting better. He's taking us to Disneyland. You and me, and Koos and Danie, after their exams.'

Jacques' skin tone had changed. She didn't know precisely what that meant, but it didn't look good. Last month he'd said he was taking Boeta to see a movie. Last month he'd still been able to walk around a shopping centre. When she'd asked what they were going to watch, he'd said they'd see when they got there. Rina thought he'd choose a cartoon but Boeta insisted on *Harry Potter*. She'd scolded Jacques

afterwards, telling him it was inappropriate. She expected the boy to have nightmares, but Boeta was fine.

'Why doesn't Tannie Marie like Harry Potter?' asks Boeta from his vantage point on the floor. Propped up on his elbows on the linoleum, he topples the figurine.

'Maybe he frightens her,' says his mother.

'Is my dream a secret too then?'

'Yes. I think so.'

'Is it a good secret or a bad secret?' asks the boy. His mother, distracted, doesn't answer.

'Mevrou says a bad secret is when someone touches your privates, and they tell you it's a secret.' Rina nods agreement. 'A good secret is a surprise party and you must not tell because it will spoil it. She said if you don't know whether a secret is good or bad, you must ask a grown up.'

'Mevrou has good ideas,' says Rina, sticking a pin into the pincushion.

* * *

The day Dr Louw had held Jacques' x-rays up to the light, pointing out the chondrosarcoma, his face had been a brown study. He had indicated a shady mass at the top of Jacques' femur with his fat black fountain pen, then he had slid the images back into the envelope, slow to meet their eyes.

'Amputation is not an option,' he said. 'We can't remove a hip.' As he outlined a daunting treatment plan of radio- and chemotherapy, Jacques had patted Rina's hand, reassuring her.

He'd driven them home and his mood had been breezy. 'n Boer maak 'n plan!' he'd said, slapping her buttocks playfully like he'd done when they were newlyweds and he, who had once captained the Boland rugby fifteen, had lifted her effortlessly over the threshold of their new home. He'd insisted on buying it even though she knew they could ill afford it. But he was from farming stock. A farmer could fix anything. Once.

Rina gently touched his hip. Jacques took her hand, kissing it, and said, 'I'll nail this in a month. Just you watch. Then we'll take the guys to America. What do you say?'

Rina said nothing. She calculated the rand-dollar exchange and figured how long it would take to pay off a new debt. A week later she had read about denial in the Hospice library.

* * *

Boeta replaces the diapers on the counter and taking a naartjie, says, 'There's a rollercoaster at Disneyland. Danie says a rollercoaster is the next best thing to flying.' As he sinks his thumb into the centre, a sickly sweet odour of rotten fruit fills the room. Rina looks up, about to say, That doesn't smell right, about to tell him to take another, but he hoots in disgusted fascination and holds it up for her inspection. Pale larvae wriggle in the light.

'Ugh. Disgusting!'

'Meh!' he says, mimicking his brothers.

'Throw it away.'

'I'll put it in Pa's new bird feeder. The loeries will like it.' He hops down the back stairs, whistling like his father does to summon the wild birds. Jacques had asked Koos to hang the new feeder near their bedroom window. He liked to watch them swooping in to gather and chatter, competing for the seed. Jacques had taught Boeta the bird calls of the Piet-my-vrou, the coucal, the barbet, the hoepoe.

Boeta re-enters the kitchen, wiping the juice off on his dungarees, and says, 'Pa said we're going to fly to America. On a plane.'

'Sometimes Pa gets things wrong.' Rina pins the strip of Velcro on the cummerbund. There was Jacques' self-diagnosis of gout, his refusal to see a doctor until it was too late. There was the financial planner she'd begged him to get rid of. She'd never trusted the ex-policeman-turned-investor who captivated Jacque's imagination. Until his pension vaporised in a scam.

Boeta picks up the DriNites once again. His fingers, tacky from the discarded naartjie, stick to the plastic exterior. He pulls them away slowly, watching the tension of his fingertips distend and relax as the two surfaces peel apart. 'We're not really going to go to Disneyland, are we?'

'No,' she says, wondering whether he is ready to hear the truth he might already have intuited, unsure of whether she is ready to speak it. 'We can't afford to go to Disneyland. Did you wash your hands?'

The boy nods and seats himself beside his mother, says, 'I was telling you my dream, Ma, but you weren't listening.'

'Tell me again. I'm listening now.'

'Pa put me in front of the broomstick and told me to drive. We changed places in the air so I was in front and Pa behind me, but then he was gone. I could still hear him. I was scared to look around because I didn't want to fall off, but there was Dumbledore, flying away with Pa. They were waving at me. Then I couldn't see Pa. The sun was behind him. I said, Wait. I said, Come back, the game's not over. Harry Potter called me back to play with him but I couldn't play any more because I'd woken up.'

'Eina!' yelps Rina as the needle slips under her fingernail. A large red droplet forms on her fingertip. She presses a tissue under her nail.

'Is Pa coming back from the hospital?' Boeta asks, rearranging the pins in the pincushion. His mother nods, sucking her finger.

'Is he going back to the hospital?'

'Uh-uh. No more treatments.'

'Then Pa is getting better. We will go to America.'

She pulls a final double stitch and lets Boeta snip the thread for the last time.

'Has Ma got a secret too?' he says, patting the cummerbund.

Rina frowns, plucking a stray thread dangling from his T-shirt, then tousles his hair.

'A secret?' Her limbs feels heavy; her mouth dry.

'Maybe we're having another party at the Mount Nelson?'

'No,' she says.

'But you're fixing Pa's belt.'

Rina's stomach lurches.

'His cummerbund. Pa says he wants to look snappy when he meets St. Peter.'

'You said we don't believe in saints.'

'Sometimes I get things wrong, too.'

Just after they'd received the diagnosis, Rina had told Marie that Jacques would not want to attend the faith healing service at The Finger of God Ministries, but when Marie phoned Jacques directly to ask if he wanted the minister to pray with him, he said, 'For sure.' Marie and the pastor visited him in hospital, laying their hands on his head, on his feet.

Jacques had felt better afterwards, needing less morphine. He asked the pastor to return.

The following day Jacques asked Rina to take in his tux. Koos had been slouching against the basin in the ward and Danie was holding his father's hand cautiously, stroking his fingers. A drip administered various medications into a fold of his baggy skin.

'Your tuxedo?' Rina wondered if the drugs were addling his head.

'Face it, Rina, I'm off to the Pearly Gates. And I don't plan to arrive looking shabby.'

'What about an eyebrow ring while we're about it,' said Koos. 'If the pastor can make a hospital visit, why would the body-piercer shy away?'

Danie said, 'Pa, you need a tatt, what about, 'Heaven can wait'?'

Jacques swatted Danie weakly. They laughed. Dr Louw couldn't say how long Jacques had. Would he see his sons graduate in three months time? Would he still be here to hold her hand on her fiftieth?

Rina folds the cummerbund and again removes the scissors from Boeta who is stabbing holes through the DriNites packaging. She rubs the pressure mark on the bridge of her nose where her spectacles pinch, then, gently, takes Boeta's face between her hands. 'Pa's coming back from the hospital tomorrow but soon he's going to leave us for ever.'

Boeta pulls away from her grasp. He squats at her feet, lining up Harry beside Dumbledore. 'When?' he says

'We don't rightly know.' She tries to close the lid of the sewing box but it no longer fits properly. The padded purple silk lining bulges, reminding her of the inside of a coffin.

'Where's he going?'

'To the angels, I guess,' Rina wipes her face with the back of her sleeve.

'Nah!' says Boeta.

'To Oumie and Oupie and Oom Jan-Willem. Maybe that's where he's going.'

Boeta shuffles the figures around on the floor. Rina starts a shopping list: sausages, bread, orange juice, cheese. He rests his head against her knee and says, 'How will he get there?'

Rina writes 'black thread' on the list before pushing it across the kitchen table. She says, 'I don't know,' just as Boeta mumbles something. She thinks he says, 'On a broomstick,' but she isn't sure she heard him

right. She should say, 'What was that?' She should check it out. Instead she takes Boeta's smooth and freckled hand in her own and rests her head on the table, feeling the coarse grain against her cheek, the cool wood.

Nompumelelo Sinxoto's Bed

Karabo Moleke

He used his fingers like a spade as he parted my thighs. I began to cry, but when I lifted my hand up to wipe my face, there were no tears.

I had given him the name 'the Gingerbeer Man', but they called him Malume Ali.

Forty-eight hours ago, my uncle and the Gingerbeer Man had been waiting outside for my aunt and me. He was a tall man with broad shoulders, big hands and a stern look on his face. My uncle was talking non-stop. He had a bottle of brandy under his arm and a brown envelope in his the top pocket of his jacket and I also noticed that there were six new goats in the family kraal. This, I would learn much later, was my dowry, ilobola. I had been sold to this man and he was going make sure he got full value for his bottle of brandy, cash and six goats.

We travelled to Johannesburg in his Ford Laser 1400. It had sheepskin seat covers and smelled like it had been driven through a field of lavender. The radio had a cassette player, but there were no cassettes in the Gingerbeer Man's car, and he never put the radio on once on our long trip. A few hundred kilometers out of Mount Frere, I slowly felt my home town bid a sad farewell to me, the last thought as I fell asleep.

He woke me up once, when we arrived at some petrol station. He asked me if I needed to use the ladies room and handed me a pie and a bottle of coke. For a moment I had forgotten I was on a trip with the Gingerbeer Man, but his unfriendly face was enough to remind me. He escorted me to the ladies' toilet and told me that he would be waiting outside. Silly man. Where would I go even if the thought of running away crossed my mind?. I came out to find him right there and I followed him to the car. It was unlocked with all the doors open, maybe to air the sheepskin seat covers.

I stayed awake for the rest of the trip and I thought about my aunt and uncle, trying to make sense of their reason for sending me away with this man.

The digital clock on the dashboard of the Ford Laser read '22:45' when the car stopped in what would be our nest, the Gingerbeer Man's home – and mine.

* * *

He was hungry from our long trip and he asked if I could cook. He said he needed to know if he would be able to come home to a well cooked meal, each day after work. I guess it was not too much to ask for. After all he had paid for my services. He led me up a single flight of stairs and after pressing a yellow button on the wall, huge steel doors stood wide open. As soon as we stepped in the doors slid shut again, with us in their belly.

Oh, Thixo, I was in Johannesburg at last! I had heard of Johannesburg and all its frills and ills, lights and plights, but the fact that I was going to discover it under the care of the Gingerbeer Man took the spark right out of it. When we reached the third floor, the steel doors seemed only too happy to let us out again, room 304 – the third door on your left. The Gingerbeer Man unlocked the burglar bars first, then the door and flicked on a switch, and my new life began.

From where I stood I could see his kitchenette filled to capacity with a mini-fridge, a two plate stove and a small wall mounted cabinet with glass doors. Closer inspection revealed his matching dinner set – four white cups and saucers plus four plates and side plates; a steel cup with four knives, four forks, four spoons and three teaspoons; a sugar basin filled to the brim with brown sugar, a small Cerebos salt cellar, a box of Rajah Hot Curry and one filled with Robertsons BBQ Spice. A bag of Iwisa Maize Meal and a wooden bowl with fresh tomatoes and onions completed the list of contents in the cupboard. An electric kettle and three spotless pots stood on the kitchen table.

'I am going to take a quick bath. Looking forward to a nice meal when I am done.' The Gingerbeer Man's voice shattered my clinical assessment of his house into fragments of panic, as he disappeared behind the door to the bathroom. Our home had a reception area where there were two couches, a TV and a coffee table. When I looked to the

right, I saw it, the neatly made bed that I am now sitting on. When I realised I had been standing there for a good ten minutes, panicked. I hadn't started cooking and I did not know my way around my home. I decided to start by chopping the onions, then the tomatoes, I looked in the fridge – I found meat and seasoned and prepared it .

He came out as I was washing my hands. He asked how I was coming along with the cooking. When I turned around I saw that he was wrapped only in a towel. I almost fell over backwards. I had never seen a man that naked before, especially a man of that age.

He came towards me and I started breathing quickly, in short shallow gasps. He just smiled at me. From the masses of uncooked food around me he gathered that I did not know how to use any of the appliances in the kitchen and proceeded to show me what to do. I made up my mind to learn as quickly as I could because I wanted him to go and get dressed, his bare chest affronted me and I wanted him as far away from me as possible.

After supper, I started doing the dishes at the slowest pace possible. The more time I spent standing there, the less I had to spend with him.

Mpumi?

I heard his voice. 'Are you calling me? I asked. 'My name is Nomthunzi.'

'Yes,' he said, his tone now cold and menacing, 'I am indeed calling you.'

I wiped my hands and went over to the reception area and sat on the empty couch, his eyes summoned me to sit next to him and before I could ignore his silent gesture, he called me and I obeyed. I sat on the couch next to him, leaving some space between us but he pulled me close to him. I could feel his breath on my neck, warm, humid and so toxic I could not breathe. He ran his big hand over my bosom, down my belly to just above my nether region. My whole body tightened up and I shut my eyes tightly,

He muttered some words under his breath about how firm my body was. He was not pleased with my undersized breasts but said they would have to do. He kissed me and my body rejected me for allowing him to do that. All this touching, feeling and groping was so repulsive, but as I started to pull away, I remembered my price and my aunt's words. 'Playtime is over' echoed in my mind. He switched the TV off and led us to the neatly made bed. I felt darkness overcoming me and every grain of

purity rushed out of me as he laid me down. He spent some time taking my clothes off and telling me again, how firm my body was. And then he entered me. I felt our combined weight sinking into the bed beneath us and everything in me sank too – my childhood, my being, my name and my everything sank.

Aunty was right – playtime was over.

I was catapulted into womanhood. It lasted three minutes but it felt like eternity. He rolled over and told me to go and wipe myself. I was too numb to even realise that I had bled. Blood. Was I finally menstruating? I was not sure, so after wiping myself and washing my face, I searched my bag for the piece of paper with my aunt's contact details but it was not in my bag. 'Nompumelelo?' his sleepy voice startled me and within seconds I was lying still beside him. I dozed off just before midnight.

* * *

For the next fourteen years of my life, I turned into Nompumelelo Sinxoto, the name of my dear husband's dead wife. Alfred Sinxoto had lost Nompumelelo Sinxoto, his wife of seven years, in a car accident eight months before he took me in. Those in the know told me as much as they could remember about her. She had also married young, but the difference between her and me was that she had fallen in love with the Gingerbeer Man – they had been high school lovers, they shared a history. After matriculating, they eloped. A nurse by profession Nompumelelo was headstrong and adventurous, modern, but loving and nurturing. She shunned culture and tradition. She was small in stature but she had been born with a formidable character and a big heart. He took me in to replace her, to start over again, but he was going to train me, make me less vivacious, more dependent on him. I would be Mpumi, but this time he would create a version of Mpumi to suit his fantasies.

Just as with his first marriage, the Gingerbeer Man and I could not have kids. At first it was a relief, I was a child myself and could not deal with being a mother while I still needed a mother myself. But as the years went by, he started saying he had wasted his money on me. First he told me not to sleep in the bed when I was menstruating, then he blamed the lack of children on me, saying I was so still and passive in bed when he had sex with me. Obviously, he said, I was doing it on purpose and so he would use sex to punish me. One day he decided that

we should try new positions. He told me to crouch on all fours – I was disgusted and humiliated. I had been demoted from my human state to that of an animal.

I hated our bed.

* * *

With time, I accepted my fate and settled firmly into my role as Ali Sinxoto's – the Gingerbeer Man's – wife. He took me to church and allowed me to enjoy some small talk with our neighbours.

Soon after that though, the absences started. He would stay away for several days and when he did eventually come home he'd pick on the smallest things. The cups had not been packed away the way Mpumi used to pack them, my 'photo-pap' was not as fluffy as Mpumi's. From there we graduated to slaps, punches, and then to my hair being pulled out. Six goats, a bottle of brandy and however much he had given to my uncle was surely too high a price for someone like me. I stopped interacting with the neighbours and he stopped taking me to church. He removed the fuse from the TV I was isolated from the outside world. He became my world, my god, and as insanity crept over a certain part of me, I began to worship him. I deserved all the good and the bad that he dished out to me. My bruises were hidden under long frocks and blouses, the black eyes covered by heavy make-up, all bought by him. I always looked good for him.

One afternoon he came home early, but as I was a good servant, dinner preparations were well under way. He went straight to the bathroom and started scratching around. I had found my aunt's number the previous night and stuck it under the cistern. How could he have known it was there? It was as if some innate radar alerted him to my misdeeds. Never had I seen him that angry. 'Nomthunzi Sishuba, umbulaleleni umfazi wami? Kutheni undenza njena? Why did you kill my beloved wife?' He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me so hard that I continued to shake after he let me go.

I was cast into the deepest sea of confusion. How could I have killed his wife? I was his wife. He sobbed and knelt on the floor for what seemed like forever. When he stood he slapped me so hard I fell to the floor head first. He told me to get up and when I could not he lifted me up himself, and threw me onto our bed. He was crying and screaming

so loud, our neighbours heard him. One or two of them knocked on our door. They could hear my muffled cries mixed with my husband's screams and sobs. He got up and went to the kitchen, and when he came back he was holding the biggest knife we owned.

'Ibokwe zami ne mali yami, for what? You wasted my money for nothing, you bitch and now you have killed my wife! I am gonna avenge her and kill you!' For a split second I thanked God because it meant I could die and go to heaven, but then ... something in me decided that I was not going down without a fight.

I killed him in self-defence.

* * *

Six goats, a bottle of brandy and a brown envelope of cash were not worth dying for. A grieving man who could not accept the death of his wife was not my problem or load to carry. After he died, I chose to keep the name Nompumelelo Sinxoto because I was not ready to part with fifteen years of my life just like that, however sad they were.

Thirteen months ago I was acquitted of murdering the Gingerbeer Man – my common-law husband. He died in this bed that I am lying in right now, but not before he got what he wanted. I was fourteen years old when he came by my uncle's house in Mount Frere. I remember how he singled me out of a group of nine girls to go and buy Stoney Gingerbeer and a packet of ginger biscuits for him. I remember thanking him for allowing me to keep the change – a whole R12.00. Two days later, the Gingerbeer Man came around again and my aunt called me into her hut. I remember how excessively dark it was on that particular day. She made me take all of my clothes off and gave me a brand new dress, the sort an adult woman would wear. Over that she threw a brand new pinafore, put a head-scarf around my waist and another on my head. I looked like a miniature version of my aunt.

She asked me if I had ever 'been' with a boy before and my answer, of course, was no. That painted a sly and dry smile on her face and as she cupped my face in her hands she said, 'Playtime is over now, you are not a child anymore Nomthunzi. You are a woman and you need to start acting like one.' I recall her saying I should call her as soon as I start menstruating and the rest was a blur. Moments later, my uncle knocked on the door and my aunt handed me a small rucksack, with a

dress, a pinafore, three sanitary pads, a pair of briefs and a piece of paper with the post office's number and her postal address. She led me out, whispering in my ears the words, 'Don't be a nuisance and don't you dare disappoint me.'

Imagining Monsters

Margot Saffer

What was that? You startle. The wind rustling? Lightning crashing. A car chasing? A gun shooting? You nod off again, perhaps for as many as ten minutes this time. You gasp. You sit up straight, awake. A dog's bark. A police siren. You breathe deep and snuggle back down into the bed. You pull your pink childhood duvet over your head and snuggle your stuffed dog, Sammy. Oy. When did police sirens start to become comforting songs? The song of Don't worry, Someone's coming, sung to the tune of beebaabeebaa.

* * *

You thought the call was about something else. A *simcha*. You smiled when you saw Missed Call: Pam Cell. You smiled because you knew that after a week of indecision, of back and forth, of head and heart mind maker upping, you were done at the conference and you could go. You had been attending a conference in the Free State, a place halfway between the Cape Town that is now home for you and Pam, your younger sister, and the Johannesburg where you grew up. You and Pam, if she had also decided, and the missed call suggested she had, could join the rest of the family at the new addition's bris.

Your older sister, Shana, had given birth to her fourth boy the previous Thursday. The bris would be in two days, eight days after the birth. You and Pam would witness the new boy being circumcised and named, and your father wincing as he had when he had watched the same ritual done with the other three. Her message just said, Call me.

You stood outside the door to your accommodation. The day was searingly hot. The lands here in the Free State hadn't drunk rain for weeks. It was just the afternoon side of midday and you struggled to

find shade. You were hungry. You hadn't eaten yet; you thought you'd just make this quick call back to Pam, then make whatever necessary plans after lunch. You were buoyed by the success of the morning's presentation. You punched in Pam's cell number. The sun glinted on the dam. You had to squint, the sun was so strong. You so badly wanted to swim, but the water didn't look safe. Her phone was off. You left a message. You moved to the thin line of shade thrown by one of the two trees at the edge of the dam. You dialled her home number. Probably won't be in, you thought. It was so hot. You were hungry. It rang and it rang and it rang. Just as you were about to hang up, Nosipho answered. She sounded distant. You'd probably disturbed her work. Maybe she had been hanging the washing. Is Pam there, you asked? No. She was already on her way. Where to? Jo'burg, said Nosipho. Jo'burg? So the call was about the bris. Okay, I've left her a message on her cell. Bye Nosipho. They will be fine. Huh? Who? Your parents, said Nosipho. They will be fine.

* * *

You doze off. A little longer this time. What now? A light in the window. It can't be lightning; it's not raining. You drip a few drops of rescue remedy onto your tongue. It's the guard's torch. He's been here every night since, going round and round your parents' house, like a teddy-bear, one step, two step ... The door of your room is locked. The key is on the bedside table alongside the panic button. Your father would be angry if he knew you'd locked your door. He was always afraid of something going wrong and you not being able to get out. You're more afraid, now, of someone else getting in. He would dismiss your concerns; rest them on the shoulders of the security guard.

Mavis is in her room at the front of the property. She still has her R400 hidden under the mattress. Her pine bed stands tall on eight bricks. Bricks may keep the tokoloshe from attacking but what keeps people safe from people?

Your father doesn't think there's any more danger. 'It's my house and I'm going home,' he responded to friends' offers to stay with them. All their 'Buts ...' were shut down with his 'No'. It was they who came to clean the blood off the carpet next to his bed while he was in surgery; they followed the ambulances, three of them, and stood by hospital

beds. There is no one else in the house now. You couldn't bear to see him alone. You haven't slept or eaten in the two days you've been here. Home?

* * *

Your heart sank into your stomach. Your stomach hardened around it, setting like concrete. At that moment you thought you'd never feel the softness of your heart again. You thought the ground had cracked open and swallowed all the laughs in the world. You and your father would never again be able to lock eyes across the table of a busy dinner party and laugh inwardly and conspiratorially. Your sister's baby, just six days old, would never know how lips form around a laugh. You didn't cry either.

You thumbed a button and Nosipho's voice disappeared. You didn't even say goodbye. Your voice closed the moment she said, 'Your parents will be fine.' Why should they not be fine? Something was wrong. What had happened? Had they been in a car accident? You thought of your father's colleague Juan James, a neurologist your family visited, who lived in a forest in Washington DC. You remembered his children Isobelle and Cecile, younger than you. Their parent's ski-mobile had hit a tree. They both died. Together. You remembered your father flying to the States, offering to adopt the girls if there was no family. Who would take me? You thought. And then, you remembered. You are twenty-five. No one will take you.

Your voice came back. As thin as the tree casting the strip of shade you were standing in. Despite the heat, you'd stopped sweating. You had gone cold. Somehow your fingers managed to dial your parents' number. The phone number that all your friends knew by heart. The code that you could be reached at for seventeen years while you lived and grew and cried and laughed and learnt to speak and forgot how to fear thunder in that house.

Answering machine. Not the recorded voice of either of your parents. A woman. A generic voice recorded without mirth or regret. Dad's cell. Your voice answered. A younger, more assured voice from years back when your father first got a cell phone and you created the message for him informing his patients, the family of his patients, that

they must wait, in their annerved state, to speak to the man they were hoping would have their answers.

Your older sister's phone. She should also be available. A doctor too, yes. But a doctor just given birth is, for the moment, a mother. She doesn't answer either. Who is left? You called your brother, Adam. He didn't answer. Where was he? Where was everyone? Was someone wondering where you were? At the edge of a dam where the Free State, Transkei, and Lesotho meet. Were they all on the side of the road somewhere just as obscure? Did they have more answers than you did?

The night before, you had spoken to your father. You wanted to tell your mother you had arrived here safely. She was asleep, he'd said. It was just before dinnertime. What was she doing asleep? She had been asleep a lot lately. Asleep or tired. You had worried about her the night before. What had you thought then? That worry was a shadow for what you were feeling now.

'Hello?'

Daniela.

Adam's wife. You didn't want to waste what little voice you had left. Daniela, what's happened? Oh Love! She went quiet. A rushed kind of quiet. A loud, rushed quiet, if such a thing is possible. She had other things to do. Children to be fetched from school, nappies to change. Life things. Things that don't stop in the face of tragic death. Were my parents going to die?

* * *

The Rabbi who was heading Adam's Yeshiva, his seminary, gave a Monday night shiur, a lecture. After dinner your father left to arrive by the 8pm start time. Your mother lingered at the dinner table over desert while Mavis was in the kitchen cleaning up.

At 8.15, two men walked into the lounge. In a voice your mother would never forget, they asked, 'Where's the *money*? Where's the money? Where the guns?' One man revealed a knife when she answered, there is no money, no guns. There is the television, the computers, the cars; she'd show them the silver. There was no money.

Your mother asked Mavis to explain to them there was no money. Even in another language, they didn't believe her. The women were

grabbed, taken to my father's study and tied up, telephone cords cutting into wrists and ankles. 'We're hungry!' one of them said.

'Let's go down to the kitchen, I'll make you a sandwich,' your mother made the mistake of looking at him from her position on the floor. He kicked her.

'Where's the *money*?' the first man shouted again, brandishing a knife taken from the kitchen. 'I've got R400 in the back.' Mavis had kept some of her wages.

'R400? That isn't money. Who needs that?'

'Have you ever earned that kind of money?' Mavis asked.

He hit her in the face.

The women were then separated to be interrogated. 'The money! I want *money*!' He threw her on the floor, placed a chair over her head to pin her down, and kicked her. His boots were heavy. He caught your mother mumbling under her breath and shouted, 'What are you saying?' The only time his demeanour softened was when she replied, 'I'm praying to God for him to make you believe there is no money here.'

It was almost two hours later when your father walked through the front door. The men rushed at him with the knives, 'Where's the money? Where the guns?'

'I'm a doctor at Chris Hani.' There was no recognition in their eyes. 'At the hospital. At Bara. There is no money here.' The one hit him against the head with the bag of jewellery. He fell. The other stabbed at him, cutting the back of his skull. He stabbed again, missing Dad's left eye by millimetres. They heard a scream.

Your mother had freed herself and run out to her balcony, aware all the while she was risking her life. She shouted, 'Help! Help!'

* * *

The bris was in the morning. You went straight from the airport. You hadn't seen your mother yet. She couldn't come so cousins sat with her next to her hospital bed. The rest of the family gathered to guide the new child into his life. The mohel snipped, the baby cried, your father winced, you all celebrated. You tinfoiled some kichel and herring and took it to the hospital.

When you stood outside the door to her ward and Dad held your arm, warning you not to be afraid, for the first time you knew you were.

You opened the door and greeted your mother before you stepped inside. You could hear in her Hello that she too was afraid to be seen.

It is this image that disturbs you most. Her face was not her face. It was a grotesque mask that she was forced to wear. A bad man had mangled your mother. This stays in your mind when you close your eyes, try to sleep, to put to rest what has happened. It is the face of the brutality that mauled her smile. Her face was swollen and limp. She smiled with one side of her full lips; the other held her memory. Unsuspecting visitors arrived at the hospital after the bris with their sympathies and their own stories on the tip of their tears. Most could not look at her. Most who could, could not speak. Those who could said that this should happen to no one. This should not have happened to your mother. But it did.

You were saddened that there were mirrors in the hospital ward: that she should have to look at herself every time she needed the intimacy of the bathroom. Her nose was broken, it was twisted to the right like the work of Picasso. If you faced her from the front or from the side, her nose pointed her pain at you. The bruises were painted with all the shades of wicked. Her mouth had been shut like a little girl told not to cry. She told you, though, that when she saw her face, she wasn't concerned; she was alive; everyone was alive. She would see her grandchildren grow up. Her reflection didn't detract from that joy.

* * *

The bathroom light is creeping under the locked door. You can't stand the thought of darkness. You're awake. You turn on the lamp and look around the room. Your room. A room you haven't lived in for nearly ten years. Your school set works are still on the shelves: Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, There's a box of letters with postmarks from Toronto, Chicago, London, Ra'anana, Melbourne; from all your friends who emigrated since 1994. You open another cupboard and find Sammy, and Poppie, and Garfield, and dolls whose names you have forgotten, like the child-faces of your faraway friends. Your mother's face is unforgettable.

What you feared most then is what you miss about Home. The lightning crashes, the thunder claps. The percussion of the Highveld storms. The drumbeat that you grew up responding to. You would sit as

a family with the lights out and watch the strikes of lightning along the horizon as they traced veins sending light between heaven and earth. You would all giggle in anticipation, counting 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... 19, and shriek when the boom of the thunder reached the large house on the koppie under the jacaranda tree. But then it was bedtime. And no matter how gently you were directed to sleep by your mother lying next to you on the bed, you couldn't let her go, you stroked her cheek, willing her to stay through the storm. You knew your brother and sister were lying awake on the other side of the wall, also staring at the dark of the ceiling turn bright white with each lighting flash. You and they shaped the same monsters from the shadows.

You fluff up your pillows, one continental, one standard, as you've always slept with, and begin placing the doll army carefully along the cushions. They defended your childhood, they will protect you now. Sammy and Poppie on top because they are the largest, Garfield on the wall-side, and a couple of teddies on the other. The door is locked. The security guard is outside. The panic button is next to your bed. The police are patrolling the streets. You hear another noise. It sounds like thunder. This time you don't startle, you don't unfurl. Sammy whispers in your ear, and you believe him, Don't worry. Lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place.

Finally, you slink to sleep under the pink floral duvet.

The Outsider

Isabella Morris

In the feeble light of the bathroom Lorinda smeared the last blob of Coral Shimmer onto her lips and squeezed them together to spread the lipstick. She tiptoed down the narrow passage, so that the clickety-clack of her high heels didn't alert Pa, but when she crossed into the kitchen Pa was already sitting in his wheelchair next to the fire, the Raceform folded on the table next to him.

'You look fancy for a girl who's just going to the TAB,' he said.

Lorinda ignored him and picked up a piece of cold toast; she snapped off the crusts, spiralled honey onto the middle and handed it to Pa, then she leaned over and kissed him on the forehead, holding her breath against the suffocating smell rising from his unwashed hair.

While Pa sucked at the sticky toast, Lorinda examined the betting forms he had filled in. 'Rolling Thunder, he's an outsider Pa but I've also got a good feeling about his chances,' she said and placed her father's bets in her handbag. Then she knelt down on the cold stone floor and removed a bottle of Klipdrift from the bottom shelf of the kitchen dresser. Pa eyed the half-jack of brandy and patted her arm as she placed the bottle on the table. 'You're okay for a girl you know,' he said.

She unlatched the top half of the stable-door and stared up at the sky; the slow rolling clouds promised a spectacular storm. The fox terrier scratched against the door and Lorinda went outside and filled its bowl with fresh water from the tap that dripped into a patch of mint.

'Hey Bella, look after Pa, hey,' she said as she broke into a run towards Pa's bakkie, ignoring the animal's watery eyes.

The hectares of fields on either side of the highway were monotonous khaki blankets overhung with gravid clouds. Lorinda flicked the windscreen wiper lever when the first drops of rain splashed onto the windscreen, and reduced her speed to a cautious ten kilometres lower

than the speed limit. She drove up and over the swells of the road until she saw the picnic area and pulled across from left to right; she drove on the opposite shoulder of the quiet road until she reached the desolate cluster of cement picnic furniture and a rusted garbage barrel, dry grass sprouting from the holes in the bottom.

She preferred to park the bakkie so that she was facing oncoming traffic, that way nobody could surprise her from behind. She took off her shoes and hobbled over the gravel, wincing at the pressure of the sharp stones underfoot. She unlocked the small doors of the bakkie, climbed into the back and knelt on the flatbed, its ridged metal bruising her knees. She unrolled the mattress with a deft movement and then she spread out the white cotton sheets that smelled of Spring Blossom fabric softener. She closed the flimsy yellow curtains she had made at sewing classes in Bethlehem the previous year, courtesy of one of Pa's gambling windfalls. When she was satisfied with the cosy bedroom she had created, she sprayed one squirt of Panache into the air then quickly jumped down from the back of the bakkie and closed the doors.

As she drove into town, she kept an eye on the dashboard clock, hoping that the TAB wouldn't be overcrowded; it was the end of the month and punters were usually over hopeful when their pockets were full.

Lorinda parked in a side street and pulled on her raincoat. The TAB was busy; punters pencilled in their choices for jackpots and place-accumulators and tri-fectas as they stood in a queue that meandered drunkenly around the block. Lorinda flicked open her umbrella. It wasn't necessary; the pavement was sheltered by an overhang, but the umbrella kept a circle of space around her. She was careful to keep her eyes downcast so that she didn't have to acknowledge anyone she might recognise from church or the Vroue Federasie.

Mr Kletz held out both his hands when Lorinda reached the counter; she handed the bets over to him and watched as he fed them into the machine. He kept his left hand outstretched, but Lorinda waited until the machine had finished grinding and only when she saw the red figures blinking on the small screen did she part with the money, mentally calculating her change while the machine spat out the printed tickets.

'Pretty Tart,' Mr Kletz said.

'I beg your pardon?' Lorinda asked; her armpits prickled.

‘That Rolling Thunder’s an outsider; a safer bet would have been Pretty Tart,’ he said, but his impatient eyes had already flicked past Lorinda, and his hands were reaching to take the next punter’s bets.

Back in the familiar confines of the bakkie, Lorinda accelerated, freeing herself from the town with its narrow streets and inquiring eyes. Lightning momentarily brightened the overcast sky and Lorinda wondered how many hitch-hikers were likely to be thumbing a ride in such inclement weather. She drove the bakkie to the stony ridge that formed the southern boundary of the blind Widow Verster’s farm and waited there. She had to turn on the ignition every few minutes so that the windscreen wiper could clear the raindrops. Through Pa’s old racing binoculars she could see the main road and the place where the swinging Ry Veilig / Ride Safe sign caught the light as it swayed in the storm. She’d easily see any army guys who arrived there hoping to hitch a ride to the station.

Popcorn white lambs gambolled in the fields even though it was drizzling. From the windy outcrop Lorinda watched as a corpulent Bedford truck stopped on the main road, dropped off a troepie, then made a wide circle and proceeded back up the road towards the army base.

The guy who had been dropped off was tall, so tall that Lorinda almost drove past him. She couldn’t imagine his long legs finding a comfortable position in the confinement of the cab. Instead, she slowed onto the newly tarred shoulder of the road and stopped. The Ride Safe sign cast a long shadow across the bonnet. He bent down and looked at her through the window, a cautious smile; she flipped the lock.

All night long the guys had teased him about the toothless farmers who liked to pick up army guys and give them blowjobs. He had considered walking all the way to Bethlehem, but soon changed his mind when the Bedford dropped him off on the tarred road and through the light rainfall he saw nothing but a basket weave of farmlands stretching into the horizon. The driver was no farmer; she had a tight white smile and a short skirt.

‘Where you going?’ She asked as he squeezed himself into the bakkie.

‘To Joburg.’

‘How long is your leave?’

‘Three days, I’ve got to be back on Tuesday.’

‘Are you going to hitch or take the train?’

‘Haven’t thought that far ahead, I just wanted to get the fuck out of that shithole – sorry – for swearing.’

She couldn’t decide if he was handsome in an ugly way, or ugly in a handsome way; it was hard to gauge the level of attractiveness of these bald army guys; he had bluish lips and a skein of scars, but his mouth looked kind; she would bet money that his nipples were brown instead of pink.

‘Do you want to drive?’ she asked him. If she spoke in simple sentences, she would manage the English.

He hadn’t been behind the wheel of a car for ages, but before he could respond she reached her left hand across his lap and lifted herself over him, making sure that her bottom grazed his crotch. He could smell the apple scent of her shampoo, feel the honey heaviness of her hair against his cheek; he slid across, the steering wheel was warm where she had held it. She sat with her back against the door and tucked her right leg under her butt so that a small triangular window opened at her thighs and skirt hem and gave him a seductive view of her crotch. He started the bakkie and pulled onto the road without even looking in the mirror. It had been a long time since he had driven a car; it was even longer since he’d had screwed anyone.

As they drove towards Bethlehem the wind cracked against the bakkie, rapid as an R1 round. Platoons of poplars, match-skinny, stood to attention on the roadside.

She said, ‘Are you married?’

He shook his head.

‘ – verloof, um, engaged?’

Another head shake.

‘ – gay?’

He laughed, so she did too.

She waited for him to ask her something; she wanted to tell him about herself. The other guys always asked – where she lived, who she lived with, why she wasn’t married – a looker like her. But he wasn’t going to ask her any of that, she could just tell from the way his eyes didn’t rise quite high enough to meet hers. His disinterest left her with the same cheated feeling she got when she bought hertzoggies that had been baked with margarine instead of butter.

'I don't care if you are married or you a moffie you know – it doesn't matter to me.'

He kept his eyes on the road. Farmhouses peeped shyly from between tree-breaks, or turned their backs to the winds of the open plains.

'Are you hungry?'

He glanced across the cab as she opened the cubbyhole, shrugged his shoulders.

'Pepper-steak pie or Simba crisps – salt and vinegar flavour?' she asked.

The pie, I'll have the pie thanks.'

She slid the pie halfway out of the packet and then twisted the paper so that he could eat it without a crumb-fallout in his lap; Pa said a girl had to be clever no matter what, but it was Ma who used to say a way to a man's heart was through his stomach.

He ate the pie, using his knees to help him steer. The distance marker indicated that Bethlehem was 7km away; he kept his eyes on the road.

She leaned over and ran her fingers across the black letters of his nametag: YFOUCHARD. No space between the initials and his surname, but she had no difficulty identifying which was which.

'Yakob? Yitzhak? Yonatan? – *Jislaaik!* Are you Jewish?'

He shook his head and made the sign of the cross.

She rolled her eyes, there was only one thing Pa hated more than Jews, and that was Catholics.

'Yvan! That's it, hey? You're a Russian, or from Poland!' She bounced up and down on the narrow seat and clapped her hands.

He wasn't going to tell her his name was Yves; he despised the ignorance about his French name.

She pouted. 'You're not very friendly are you; especially considering I've just given you a lift,' she said and lifted her left leg onto the dashboard; Maybe he didn't have a lot to say, but she saw him look, his dark-lidded eyes unsettled her.

'You didn't just happen to be on the road back there, did you?' he said, slowing the car down.

She chewed at a hangnail.

'What were you doing back there, hanging around in the middle of nowhere?' he insisted.

In the early days of her courier service she had prepared excuses – like folded love-letters tucked into her mind and ready to go. ‘I’ve got to check on one of our sick lambs at the vet in town,’ or ‘I got lost looking for a farm that has a foal for sale.’ But army guys didn’t seem to care, they were just grateful for the lift. She pretended not to understand Yves’s question, instead she leaned forward, touched the blue shadow on his chin where the black stubble would break through by nightfall.

‘I pick up troepies and I fuck them. Please tell me you’ve just come back from the Caprivi. Please, please, please! I haven’t fucked anyone who’s been to the border yet,’ she said.

He ignored her irritating bouncing on the seat, her shining eyes. He pretended not to understand her desperation for a troepie who’d been to the border. His bunk-mate Venter had slapped his thighs with frustration when Yves told him he was heading home for the weekend pass. ‘Ag, jirre, you lucky fucking poes! You know how chicks dig ou’s from the border; I don’t know what it is. It’s like they think you got a dick like a rocket or something, fuck man!’

She edged closer to him and one by one she removed his left hand fingers from the steering wheel, she brought his hand over to her and slid his fingers into the soft place beneath her panties.

He stared at her small pointy chin, her fine narrow nose, but her eyes were closed, her head dropped back so that all he could see was tap-tapping in the vein that crossed the hollow of her throat.

‘You can stop about two kilometres before town. There’s a group of blue gums and a road that goes nowhere,’ she said.

He didn’t have to move his fingers; she manipulated her pelvis so that he could feel her contracting against them. It was difficult to steer and change gears with his right hand and he eventually screeched up the muddy road in first gear; she leaned over and cut the engine, his fingers twisting inside her as she did so. Then she lifted herself, disconnecting. She slid open the rectangular window hatch behind her in the cab and wriggled into the back of the bakkie. He watched her pale legs disappear. He sat in the cab for a long time listening to the wind rustling the dry leaves of the blue gums. He glanced at the window and knew he could not manoeuvre himself through the same narrow space that the girl had. He stepped out of the cab and walked around to the back. As soon as he opened the squeaky doors he smelled the fresh linen; he sat on the flatbed and unlaced his muddy boots.

She knew that if she wanted more than a wham-bam-thank-you-mam quickie she'd better get him into the mood to play for a little bit longer. Instead of stripping down completely she wore a white lace bra and panties. Her brother Rudolf's *Scope* said that apricot or pink underwear wasn't as big a turn-on for men as women believed it to be; black was provocative and so was red, but white was the colour that really got men's guns loaded. White was virginal, pure, and every man wanted to think he was the first, even if he knew he wasn't. By the look on his face, he was definitely pleased with her lingerie.

'My name is ...' she began, but he clamped his hand over her smile.

'It's just a fuck,' he said.

She was good at releasing khaki buttons from stiff buttonholes with her teeth; loved rolling her tongue across broad chests, but he kept her on her back by fastening her left arm behind her head in a strong grip. He was on top of her. She swallowed the lump in her throat, she had never fucked anyone whose name she didn't know. His feet were freezing. Her nipples tightened. She touched herself with her right hand and drew her fingers up to his lips but he turned away. She felt shame searing her cheeks.

When he was finished, he rolled off her and lay panting with his eyes closed. She edged closer until her face was against his shoulder; she was right, his nipples were brown with the smallest curls of dark hair around them. She could have leaned across him right then and nibbled one, but instead she closed her eyes to stop the tears. He used his feet to find his pants. He lit a Chesterfield in the back of the bakkie, blowing smoke rings so perfect she couldn't resist stabbing her finger into them. He offered her a drag but she shook her head even though she smoked a box of twenty a day. When her breath was steady enough to reassure her that she wasn't going to cry, she sat up and opened one of the small curtains. The wheat fields all around whispered a sigh of sameness that resonated so deeply within her that she knew she could not go home.

'Come with me to the cheese festival,' she said.

He kept his eyes on the ceiling; made no acknowledgement of her suggestion. Though he thought then of his parents ... He glanced at his watch – quarter to twelve, Saturday. They would be standing in Sandro's Deli, arguing over whether to buy the Ementhaler or the Edam. They would hand over the money with a grimace of reluctance because they

didn't like Sandro, the Italian owner, but where else in Johannesburg were discerning French ex-pats supposed to buy quality food? Grandpère Fouchard would be in the family's pale blue Renault tapping his knees and watching the parking meter.

'Do you like it here?' she asked.

He shrugged, looked at her.

'How long have you been at this camp?'

He looked away again, drew on his cigarette.

'Give me a drag of your smoke.' She held out her fingers but he narrowed his eyes and drew on the cigarette, allowing the hot edge to run down the cigarette until it almost reached the filter, and then he blew out the thinnest reed of white smoke. 'Please come with me to the festival,' she said. She kept her eyes on her panties as she untwisted them and pulled them over her calves; they caught slightly at the damp part at the top of her thighs.

He stood next to the bakkie in his underpants and ground out his cigarette next to the rear wheel. When Maman and Papa finished their shopping they would drive Grandpère to Alliance Française where he played boules every Saturday afternoon with other old men who smelled of unwashed wool, and onions and red wine.

He took a slash against the blue gum tree. His brother Gregoire, or Greg as his friends called him, would be watching the 1st XI at the school field, and in between changeovers and innings, Gregoire would tell everyone how his brother from the border was coming home for the weekend. Surrounded by his team-mates, Greg would promise them a story on Monday – a war story, a hero's story; a story that Yves couldn't produce. Yves pulled up his zip with a violent yank and stalked towards Lorinda. 'Where would we stay?'

His question startled her. She hadn't expected an answer and was lost in her hopes that Pa's bets on Random Excuse were going to pay off. She watched YFOUCHARD pull on his khaki fatigues. She waved her hand around the bakkie, 'Ag, ons kan –'

He glanced at her sharply.

'We'll book into a caravan park; it's cheap,' she said and her hands moved quickly, snapping her lacy bra behind her, pulling on the tube of skirt and a soft white T-shirt; she didn't want him to change his mind; she tossed him the keys. 'Come, let's go.'

She turned on the radio and leaned closer to the dashboard so that she could hear the commentator. 'And it's Leaping Star and Pretty Tart. Rolling Thunder's coming up on the inside, with two hundred metres to go it's anyone's race. Habib's encouraging Leaping Star but it's Rolling Thunder making the home straight his own. Pretty Tart's not prepared to let Rolling Thunder take the race, she's holding the pace. With fifty metres to go it's Pretty Tart and Rolling Thunder. Leaping Star will have to be content with a third. There's nothing between Pretty Tart and the outsider Rolling Thunder but as they cross the finish line it's –'

He leaned across her and turned down the volume.

She turned to face him, her face twisted with frustration. What would she tell Pa? But he didn't notice, he was looking in the rear-view mirror, reversing the bakkie. When they pulled onto the main road he looked at her and asked, 'What's your name?'

Chickens and the Clinking of Glass

Megan Ross

Philosopher Merleau-Ponty, a Frenchman quite enamoured with the science of existential phenomenology, said that the world is ‘an inalienable presence’. It must be that people are the alienable presence then, I thought, because never before have I felt so disconnected from the goings on around me. A half hour’s drive through the township, made bearable by musings on Sartre and co, and still no sign of Nora’s shack. Row upon row of peppermint coloured houses passed me by, their toothpaste colour mingling with the dust that began to undo the work of my hay fever medication. *I will just talk to her, ask her directly. No, I’ll ease into it, seem pleased to see her. I’ll find out what’s going on. Antihistamine, I need an antihistamine. I’ll see if she needs anything, take her to Spar. No, that will take time.* I slowed down, breaking harder than I intended to. *Of all the rental cars, why on earth did I get a Polo? God, can I even still speak Xhosa? And would it kill these kids to stay out the road for two seconds! This noise, I can’t deal with this noise. Why are townships so effing loud?*

With every passing shack my childhood drew nearer to me. I would not admit it, but I dreaded looking at the woman who had raised me, who held me and smacked me when I was cheeky. I was not ready for her skew-teeth smile, the knowing in her eyes. The clock on my dashboard told me another minute had passed. Time was slipping out of my hands; I seemed at a loss to control it. Moments were speeding by so quickly, the world a blur in my rear view mirror. And then as if in a dream it slowed down to a standstill: the blur returned to a series of ordered shapes, colours returned to the spaces to which they belonged. I felt as if my whole essence was being propelled towards an inevitable moment, one

in which I was losing all control of the self which I had worked so hard to become, and own. The sounds of Xhosa were making me drowsy, taking me back.

Back to what Natasha? Why are you so afraid of seeing Nora? I should have just stayed in Cape Town. This is ridiculous. Halfway across the country in the wrong direction, to a town I hate. What is the point? Antihistamine, maybe I have some in my boot. I need a drink. No, I need to remember what Bev taught me, stop trying to control the situation, let it happen, react to what happens, think before you react.

Finally, a Colgate-pink shack came into view. I parked my car and negotiated myself along the path, getting irritated with the chickens that were bobbing along next to me. *A welcoming party, how sweet. Weren't there chickens in the stories Nora used to tell you Natasha? Wasn't there a whole story just about the adventures of a chicken?* I could hear the continuity presenter on SABC 1 announce the new season of Generations. I heard a familiar voice, the unlatching of a stable door, and then her face. The person standing in front of me merged with the woman of my memories and became one with the voice that spoke to me. 'Tasha, what are you doing here? Hello baby, kunjani kuwe?'

'Ndiphilile nkosi Mama, I'm alright thanks. I have missed you!'

Clutching a children's book in my hand, I stepped forward. I reached out towards my childhood nanny and the whole world around me disappeared. Reality began to melt away in dissipating clouds and the ochre and scarlet and teal of my childhood crept into my mind, creating a smoky filmstrip that began to play before my eyes like a 1940s movie. My childhood bed. It was there, in my mind, a testament to every moment of loneliness I have ever felt. My mother's voice, the voice I could never block out, telling me to stop crying, yelling at me from the other room to 'quit disturbing her or else'. The clink of a glass, a bottle.

In a room the size of a small flat, in a bed fit for the doe-eyed princess I was, I would sit, high atop a mass of pillows and stuffed animals, the master of my tiny universe. A place that only I would control, a place that I could control. My mother told me when I was fifteen that a bed is at first, the place for a daughter and her mother, and then later, the woman and her lover. When she opened up to me and shared that small insight, I was startled and never forgot that afternoon.

Mother was not so much a mother as she was the absence of one. Her face remains hazy in my mind, made clearer only by the photo I

keep of her in my apartment. Her absence was much more than her being too busy to raise a child – it was the lack of her maternal instincts, there was not even the hint of a bond between us. She could sit on my bed and still remain distant, untouchable, someone I would never reach no matter how close our physical proximity. Until she hired a nanny for me, our relationship hardly seemed odd although I sometimes ached for a closeness we did not share.

With the arrival of Nora, my nanny, came an awareness of my mother's absence and my craving (which at that point I could not quite articulate) for someone to share my existence. Short, round and covered in a velvety brown skin that shone in the East London sunshine, Nora had a sharp mind and a sharper tongue, and it was not long before she became a formidable presence in my life.

'Come in sisi, come in.' I walked into the shack and sat on the edge of her bed, saying hello to the little ones who were snuggled under layers of blankets. 'These two are sick so they stayed home from school today. Remember when you stayed home from school Tashi? We would read stories all day!'

'Nora, I came to ask you something. I ... I was looking through my story books. This sounds so strange and I'm sorry to bother you about this, I don't quite know why I'm here, all the way from Cape Town and it seems unnecessary now, but I cannot find the stories you told me, they're not in here. I am just; I'm just confused because I thought these were the ones you read to me and ...' I stared at the book, and Nora, with an incredulous look on her face, told me to be quiet and relax for a few moments.

Earlier that week, on a humid Sunday, I decided to sort through some old boxes that I had just taken out of storage. When I found a large cardboard box filled with books, a rush of excitement ran through me and honey coloured warmth spread from my cheeks to my toes. Wiping the remnants of several moths off the cover of my favourite story book, I realised that in my two hands I held my childhood. Turning to the first page, I anticipated the adventure to unfold in front of me as it did when Nora read to me; I stared blankly at the page, waiting for the soothing tones of English spoken in a Xhosa accent to fill my ears. When it dawned on me that I would have to do the reading myself this time, I held the book further from my eyes, at arm's reach, and began to read. The story was innocent and mild, a buttercup and daisy-filled tale of

little animals in a forest, pure candy floss that melted in my mouth and was soon forgotten.

Astonished, I read the book again, waiting for the lions and monsters and little girls to jump into the tale as they had done so many years ago. Confused, I quickly paged through the next story book, and then the next, scrutinising each word. I wanted to shake the book and force the sentences to fall into place, reveal the stories of my childhood. But the letters stood still and stubborn, obtuse in their flowery, vacuous kid-talk. I was now completely baffled, and, without Nora there to tell me what was going on, I began to doubt those happy days as if they were the simply fruits of an overactive imagination, memories that had somehow sprung from the great absence.

Nora saved me from my own fears, from the aching loneliness that terrified me at bed time. I was always terrified of going to sleep, of having to lie in a bed too big for a little girl, in a room that seemed to swallow me up. However, no temper tantrum could persuade Nora to postpone my bed time to a little later, and so, probably after realising that I hated being alone, she would prolong my sleep time by reading stories to me every night. She spoke in a buttery tone that warmed me to my core. My mother dragged her voice out of her throat like long nails on a blackboard. Hearing it made me feel as if I was chewing on tinfoil, stuffing pins into my ears. *Have you achieved your bourgeois dream Natasha? Exercised the demons of your past? In therapy now, how quaint. Wasn't I good enough for you Natasha? Wasn't I?*

She never let me go without anything when I was growing up. I was the first girl in my grade three class to get Spice Girl shoes, I was allowed to drink when I was sixteen and I had no curfew the second high school began. I got a car before my licence, and had an unlimited allowance. It was for this reason that I felt an unerring sense of guilt for divulging my hatred for my mother, for going to my therapist (a redhead named Bev, my mother hated redheads) and talking about her.

But she was cold and distant, and warmed up to me only after a couple of drinks and even then I knew that it was not real. She was a milky-skinned ice queen, and I had to remember that no amount of wine would change that. Clad in snobbery and crisp enunciated vowels, she wore her private schooling like a badge that she gladly used to separate herself from those who had received a somewhat 'lesser' education. *Now really Natasha, do you have to sound so common? I send you to elocution*

lessons and still you embarrass me with your speech. She was the kind of woman who did not like her child, whose maternal status was the result of a broody husband more than her own desire. I suppose she had fallen pregnant with me because that is what she felt married women were expected to do, and it seems that she became very over the idea of an infant the minute she squeezed me out of her tight womb. I never looked anything like her – I was short with a flyaway mop of brown hair and an olive skin, supposedly taking after my father, the only person who had been able to melt my mother's exterior and encourage in her a bit of warmth.

Since the nights of storytelling, I have always associated my bed with Nora, warmth and the lingering smell of Rooibos tea. For as long as I can remember, bed time involved me throwing a tantrum and Nora willing me to behave myself before she got into trouble with the absent Madam. She encouraged me to dream and reach for something beyond myself, pushing me to see beyond the materialistic existence that I had so far experienced. Nora's encouragement helped my imagination to unfurl itself like a baby fern after a cold night. It made the heartbreak of losing my father, and the sting of my mother more bearable. Lying in bed with this large Xhosa woman, I began to forget the differences between us and was sometimes surprised to see that we did not look alike. In her comforting voice, Nora's story telling would leave tastes of pumpkin and *samp* and oats in my mouth, making me crave the next story like it was a nourishing meal.

I keep this in mind when I reminisce about Nora, realising that it was she who tucked me into my bed each night, hushing me to sleep with lullabies. Each morning I would wake from a sleep filled with fires and animals, a smile on my face, cheeks flushed with the enjoyment of the bed time story from the night before. Nora usually padded into my room at this time, humming a song from the radio that she quickly tuned back to Radio Algoa before my mother arrived home at night. Arms open, smile wide as a crescent moon, she would hug me with strong arms and pick me out of my bed, telling me to get ready for school.

As the months passed by, my relationship with Nora grew like a vine that intertwines itself between the milky white thorns of the Acacia trees. I was safe with her, protected from the creatures that hid themselves under my bed, and I soon became unafraid of the shadows that used to grow like a dark mist in my room. Slowly, my nightmares stopped and

were replaced by the moments of pure magic that became my dreams, busy with the happenings of Nora's stories. These tales danced about and sparked; electricity on their pages. It would not have surprised me if the characters had climbed out of their watercolour confines and sang to me, standing like minpins on the place where they were painted. Nora would read and would laugh as she did so, amused and delighted at the quirks of the characters. Her whole face glowed with the enjoyment of her story telling, and this energy made me love her even more.

One Thursday night, while we were sipping tea and giggling about something I cannot remember, my mother stormed into my room, letting in a chilling draft that sent me scurrying under the covers. The smell of chardonnay cut right through me. She had spilled on her dress. She looked surprised to see Nora reading to me, and demanded to know why I was still awake at such an hour.

'Madam, Tasha gets nightmares when she sleeps by herself, reading to her helps her to fall asleep'.

Expecting the ice queen to shout at me, I looked up at Nora, and she put a chocolaty arm around my small body.

Instead of the words of anger I was anticipating, a look of jealousy flashed across my mother's face, emerald flecks dancing in her blue eyes.

'I was unaware that Natasha battled to fall asleep,' she said rather stiffly, using the formal tone that she reserved especially for Nora. She could not even stand upright and so unsurprisingly it did not have an effect on my nanny. 'In the future, I shall read to her myself.'

And with that, she turned on her heel and left my room, frosty air following her as she departed, huffily almost. Nora looked at me, and, trying not to look too disappointed, I smiled and told her it would be nice to have Mummy read to me. Her lips widened into a forced smile. She patted my hand and kissed my wavy hair, telling me it was late and that she had better get to bed.

The following night, at exactly seven o'clock, my mother entered my bedroom, armed with a story book and a cup of espresso that reeked of caffeine. She sat awkwardly on the edge of my bed, not daring to slip her skinny legs under the covers. With a clearing of her throat, and without another word she began to read from a book that still had the Exclusive Books price tag on it. I was bored stiff and pretended to enjoy the story, looking up at her and smiling when she turned each page. By

the end of it I was falling asleep, my mind switched off by the impersonal tone of my mother's voice, the careful, almost afraid way she read each sentence. When it was done, she closed the book and bent over, kissing me on the cheek. Her heart shaped mouth was full and coated in YSL, but the place where her lips had been left a cold imprint on my skin. Standing up, she said, 'Pleasant dreams,' looking around my room as if she had never been inside it before. She looked so out of place in her child's bedroom, something that even at that age I spotted from a mile away, and I stifled a giggle when I saw the terrified look on her face when she saw the framed photograph of herself and me, a stiff, posed picture taken in a studio. She left my room, and never read to me again, making some excuse or other about having to attend book club more often.

Nora was gracious about it, and returned to my bed the following night, smelling like Vaseline and detergent, that brilliant smile peeking cheekily over her chin. As much as she possibly could, my mother handed over the baton of motherhood to Nora, leaving both the stories and life to carry on. Again Nora took her place in my bed as story teller, and, this time, surrogate mother.

Even as years passed and I outgrew Nora's bedtime stories, she was always the woman who I confided in, my protector from the pains of childhood and then adolescence, the source of comfort in those cruel years of high school. When I finished university and left home, Nora left the confines of being my nanny and went back to the township she used to return to every second weekend of the month, mostly to see her son and his children. I remember her complaining about my house being so new and so clean and so un-lived in. Returning to Mzamumhle, she said, helped her to regain her sense of self again, recapture that vibrant energy that was somewhat lacking in the house in which I lived. When I came home to South Africa after a brief but exciting year overseas, I moved into a large house in a rather affluent area, buying my way back into my old life, using the shiny pounds that belonged to my new one.

It is only natural for the adult mind to see childhood through easy-going rose-tinted glasses, romanticising even the most mundane moments of one's young life. But somehow it feels as if those years were truly beautiful, hours filled with the wandering lions and zebras and ocean tides that my dreams emptied out into my life, the adventures spilling into my reality, slowly becoming part of who I grew up to be. As I grow older, I realise that it was in my bed that I was given a mother, not

a woman whose egg I grew from, but the woman whose heart I grew in. Everything I lacked was given back to me, as if the vacuum that nature abhors so much shifted the events of my life, putting Nora in my path, rescuing me from an empty, loveless childhood. I was never angry with my own mother. Instead, I was saddened by her inadequacy to fulfil her biological duties. In a way, I felt sorry for her, sympathy that rose like ash-grey dust out of my pores every time that I was in the same room as her.

That Sunday afternoon I sat on my double bed, feeling like a princess lost all over again. That awful feeling tainted the next few days and a few indulgent therapy sessions later, and after listening to my psychologist, Bev, I realised that I would have to go back to Nora. And it was while I was packing and trying to read through one of the stories at the same time that it dawned on me – Nora could not read. All those years, while she sat, hour after hour in my bed with me, prolonging the moments until I would have to face my loneliness, she would hold my picture books in front of her and create her own world of fantasy and adventure. She had simply made up tale after tale, mixing Xhosa folklore and her own childhood experiences with the sparkling gems of her imagination. Not long after that realisation I climbed aboard the N2 and braved the journey to the Eastern Cape.

So there I was: emotional and pathetic, in a township a thousand kilometres from my cosy suburb in Cape Town, asking for answers to questions I was not even sure how to ask. Ridiculous.

In Nora's chocolate-box house, which was all but taken up by the oversized bed in the middle of it, I sat and stared at Nora. I was reminded of those mornings in bed, where, from my window, I could see the brilliant sun yawn and stretch its way over the silky horizon, making orange and red waves dance over the surface of the sea. Below them, like servants to the sun, I saw black people walk to work while I sat content in my little nest, not yet prey to the cold fingers of guilt that would later around my heart and embed themselves in my thoughts. From my bed I would listen as loud bursts of Xhosa floated up into the air like bubbles, bursting as they got closer to my ears and alerting me to a whole other world of language and colour and sound.

After a brief and animated exchanging of news, mostly with Nora complaining about the municipality and the price of electricity, I pulled

one of my story books out of my bag and asked her if she remembered it.

‘Of course sisi, it is the story that I am busy telling to my grandchildren.’ Incredulously, I asked her where the story had come from, because it was not written in the book.

‘Tasha,’ she said, impatiently, ‘I did not have to read to tell you a story. My stories come from a time before you, just as they come from a time before me. I was told them by my own mother, and just as I told them to you, I am now telling them to my grandchildren.’ She smiled and a lump lodged itself in my throat, constricting my windpipe, stopping me from talking. All of a sudden Natasha disappeared and I became the Tasha who used to snuggle under the down duvet and close her eyes, safe and content in the company of extraordinary love. While I bent down and buried myself in Nora’s shoulder, I felt a burning in my chest, the culmination of years of waiting for that absence to fill itself, for Nora to take the place of my mother. I realised at that very moment that Nora would never be my mother, it was impossible for her to transcend the boundaries between us and assume the ordained space that only one woman can fill.

I gave her one more squeeze and she held me at arm’s length. Taking my hand in hers, she walked to her large bed, settled herself between two of the little ones, and, looking at me, smiled.

That woman is my childhood, I thought. She held me, and made my empty bed a warmer place. The sound of chickens squawking woke me from my reverie, and I realised that Nora had donee for me what I truly needed; if only for a few moments, she was able to share my reality, and make the journey of experience a little less lonely. I still felt hollow inside, but decided to do what I always did when feeling so empty. Picking up Siya, the youngest, I sat next to Nora, and, pulling the cover up to my chin, got comfortable for one last story.

Fool's Gold

Tinashe Chidyausiku

Somewhere, in a dilapidated wooden shack in the town of Mbare, a young man in his mid-twenties slowly came to wake in the semi-darkness of the early hours of morning. He enjoyed the chirping of birds as part of his luxurious dream until the thud of a heavy object, the noise coming from somewhere outside, disturbed him from his last moments of laziness. His eyes flew wide open, his heart was beating. Logic kicked in, he quickly realized he remained in the seclusion of his small space, that it was time to rise, and he groaned. His leaden limbs and clouded mind demanded more sleep, his eyes were still heavy with fatigue, but the imaginary chirping was the sign that it was time to get going.

His threadbare sheets and tattered blankets had kept him warm throughout the night. He was reluctant to get up and face the harsh world outside his door. His single spring-mattress bed provided him with a place to escape the reality that life was no easy flow, and despite how worn his bedding was, his bed was the only safe place he knew, to lay down his head, to drift to sleep. It beat sleeping outside in the naked space.

Sighing deeply, he made a decision to get up. Throwing his blankets aside, he shifted, sat upright. As his cracked feet touched the cold surface of the icy concrete floor, a chill gripped him. Goosebumps rose and spread, the man's skin looked like chicken flesh. He shivered, his yellow teeth chattered violently. Rubbing his hands together to generate warmth he rose to his feet. His eyes darted in the small space of his shack, becoming accustomed to the darkness. He moved forward and bumped into a stool he kept by his bedside. He yelped in pain. The man kept a candle on this same stool which toppled over when he stumbled into it. He went down on his knees and fumbled on the ground until he found it. All that remained of the candle was a stump now but it would

serve the purpose none the less. A box of matches had also fallen to the floor and he retrieved it, struck a match and held it to the wick.

The small space was bathed in light.

In one corner was an old metal dish propped on a wooden box. Right beside it stood a five litre plastic bottle filled with water. The man poured water into the dish. It made a soft splash on the metal. He wished that he could heat up the icy water but he neither owned a stove nor had the time to build a fire outside. Time was precious.

Outside the air was cold, but fresh, and the man inhaled deeply. Filling his lungs, he exhaled slowly, strangely exhilarated. It was still dark out, but no longer pitch black. The sun was rising. The man was dressed only in a tattered grey T-shirt and faded brown shorts. His heels were badly cracked but he never went anywhere barefoot, he wore his old rubber slippers. Whenever they tore, he had always managed to piece the fragile rubber back together.

Something wet ran down the man's chin. Mucus ran freely from his nose. He blocked one nostril and blew to the ground, then wiped his face with his hand and wiped his hand across his shirt.

The pushcart lying against the shack wall was well concealed by thorn branches. As the man moved the branches, he pricked his thumb and blood seeped through the piercing. He sucked his dirty finger. He never could escape unscathed when each morning he removed the thorn branches, but that did not stop him from piling them on top of his pushcart. He believed that they deterred anyone who would want to steal from him.

An old woman who had come to the township from a homestead up north had told him the previous day that she had work for him and that he was to come early in the morning. It was in the direction of her place that the man started out. He moved with haste for it was getting lighter and soon the summer sun would be scorching hot. Mbare was coming alive with every step he was taking. Pots clanked, water was poured, there were sounds of children waking, mothers scolding, somewhere a radio was booming.

A sewerage pipe had burst in the lane he was walking in. At first the man wanted to vomit from the stench, but soon he grew accustomed to it. The city council never bothered to replace the broken pipes in this overcrowded residential area, because they would only burst again. The

man walked through the putrid ooze, some of it splashing onto his legs, but he did not flinch.

The roads were marred with pot holes and the man had to twist and turn to avoid them. Soon he was sweating, and no longer cold. The house he was going to was around the corner and the man added more pace to his step. He was almost run over by a green Peugeot speeding from a blind corner. The man jumped out of the way of the old car in record time. He cursed the careless driver, then continued on his way.

The gate was locked with a rusted chain attached to a padlock. The man hoped that he was not late because old women were notable for their scolding. He did not need to be told off. He clanked the chain against the padlock and saw a curtain sway aside immediately and was reassured. He was expected and most probably the old woman was ready.

The frail looking woman came from the house and behind her followed a younger woman carrying two heavy travelling bags. Behind them came a man, probably in his mid-forties, who dragged what looked like a heavier bag than the bags the younger woman had brought out. He was panting when he got to the pushcart and looked drained.

The man immediately took over, piling the bags onto the cart. He could swear that the old woman had filled the last bag with bricks. He was fascinated with women who travelled. They always took with them full and heavy bags as if they were moving permanently, he chuckled to himself. The old woman wanted to go to Mbare Musika to board a bus. She kept on about how she looked forward to returning to her rural home in Murehwa. The fare decided, the man set off, leaving the old woman to come after him as fast as her old bones could carry her. By the time they got to the bus station, the woman was panting and cursing at the man. He looked at the old woman and his eyes rested on her feet. She wore beautiful black tennis shoes which the man coveted. He could not afford such luxuries. Each time he tried to save up for good shoes, the price shot up. It frustrated him. The only place he owned shoes was in his dreams and he thought wistfully of his bed where he would relax after his hard work at the end of the day. At that moment, he longed for the day to end so that he could go home and sleep.

However, back in the moment the man had to move on and look for more people he could carry luggage for. This was how he made a living. If he did not find customers he would go to bed hungry. At least

in his dreams he could eat, but he would always wake up as hungry as ever. He did not wish this particular day to be one of those days when he would go to bed hungry.

Mbare Musika was a beehive of activity. People were streaming in from all directions. The man manoeuvred between people and buses. Before long the man found two women who needed his services. They wanted him to carry their produce to the market place to sell. He would have to travel only a short distance from the bus terminus to the market place, but he needed the money no matter how little it would be. Despite their pleading with him to reduce his fare, he stood firm and would not change his mind, saying that he had to eat as well. He lifted the heavy baskets of produce, his muscles straining under the weight. He transported eight baskets in two trips. On the first trip he carried five, on the second he carried the remaining three. He tried to be fast so that he could do more work. A bus drove past. He heard cries from behind him: 'Mukwasha zvinhu zvedu zvoparara here ...' – 'Son, should our goods perish ...'. The man grinned but did not say anything. He had to be fast. The faster he could push, the more money he would make. The man felt lucky. He believed that he would earn double from the two women.

However, when they got to the market place, the other women there ganged up on him and he was paid half of what he had expected to make. It was a disappointment. In his dreams he knew that he could persuade anyone and get what he wanted, but not in reality. He seethed with anger, he tasted the bitterness of humiliation. Like everyone else, he was simply trying to make a living.

Just at that moment his stomach sounded with hunger. He ignored the rumbling because he did not have enough money to buy anything to quieten it down. The man remembered a dream he had once had. He was eating a mountain of sadza and juicy beef stew and green vegetables, cooking oil dribbled down his chin.

It was still early. More work had yet to be done. He licked his chapped lips. His eyes darted back and forth picking out possible customers. He was not alone in this search. Others who pushed carts were doing the same. And other darting eyes were those of thieves and pick pockets, eyes trained to look for the vulnerable at the bus terminus. The man was determined to make it through the day. He would not steal.

On his way out off the market place a petite young woman walked up to him and requested his service. She asked him to carry some containers of water from the market place to a cooking site a stone's throw away. She asked how much it would be and the man quoted a figure that he felt was reasonable. The woman seemed startled, she made a move to walk away but the man stopped her and reduced his charge and the woman agreed. The man grumbled under his breath. Women were always complaining about his fares which he considered within reach of the ordinary person on the street.

Each container of water was very heavy. He asked the woman to add a few more notes to the fare they had agreed on, but she remained adamant and even threatened to withdraw her service and call on another person to carry her containers for less. The man's complaints were futile. He knew that someone else would offer to carry for her at a lower price; it was a competitive business. Despite the argument, he got a few notes from the woman. He managed to get another customer right away who wanted to have her firewood carried to her home at Mbare National.

It was noon and his stomach had given up its rumblings and gone quiet. Sticky sweat tricked down the man's back, his body was soon bathed in sweat as he continued his trips back and forth. His T-shirt stuck to his skin. His muscles ached, but he would not give up. Business was booming and rest was a luxury he could not afford until the evening. The man grew more and more exhausted but he would not give up. His body shivered slightly from hunger, he felt faint, but he had to keep on his feet. He passed a beer hall and grew envious of men who could afford to stop and sit, drink away their worries and eat meat. There was a braai stand where some were gathered, laughing and talking, their meat browning on the open fire. The aroma of cooked meat teased the man's nostrils. He went weak at his knees but he resisted the temptation to stand and stare like a beggar. He asked a passer by what the time was and was told that it was way past four o'clock. His heart sank. He had missed lunch ages ago, but he smiled and set his mind on looking forward to going back home to rest.

The man continued to work, focusing on doing as much as he could. The market and bus terminus was swarming with people, some of whom required his services and he went back and forth finding more. Well into the night, weak from the exhausting work, the man decided to head for a food stall. He told himself that he would reward himself with

a mountain of sadza and steamy beef stew, like the meal of his dream, and he smiled to himself. He had to pass a public toilet to get to the food stall. The stench of stale urine came at him and he almost gagged from it. He had to eat. He needed energy to get back to his shack. The women at the stall chatted away as they cut meat and vegetables to cook. There were tripod pots on the fire and the beautiful aroma invited him to linger. His mouth watered. He smelled the fats and meat cooking. The site was crowded with a group of people and there was nowhere to sit. His feet felt as if they could give way under him any second.

The man gulped down his sadza, not steamy hot because he could not wait for the next lot which was still cooking. The sadza tasted as heavy as if it was wearing three coats. It was warm enough, but it did not live up to the dream-sadza the man had been looking forward to the whole day. His meat was almost done. It was tough meat that needed to have been on the fire for quite a bit longer. Disappointed, the man licked his fingers clean and dragged himself home.

It seemed to get darker with every step he took, and home seemed further and further away. He tried to pick up his pace but his legs were swollen from walking back and forth the whole day and he had started to limp.

At last, the man turned toward his shack amongst the other shacks. He was home. He overturned his cart and covered it with the thorn branches as quickly as he could. He did not feel the thorns pricking his flesh. Pushing open his wooden door he entered the dark space. He knew where he had left his candle and match box. He bumped into an unseen object and yelped in pain. He felt for his matches and scratched alight a match and lit the stump of candle. The small space was bathed in light and the man smiled as he turned to his bed.

Much as he wanted to jump onto it, he had to wait. His body was swathed with sweat and he had to freshen up first. Pouring water into his metal dish, he sank his worn-out bathing towel into the cool water, wrung it, then proceeded to wipe down his body, getting rid of dirt and grime.

Finally, the man limped towards his unmade bed and climbed into it. His tired limbs gave way, relaxing immediately. Covering himself up, he blew out the candle and his heavy eyelids immediately closed. The man drifted into a deep sleep and images of new tennis shoes and hot steaming sadza came to him. Deep breathing warmed the small space as the man dreamed off into the darkness.

In Sickness

Melissa Gardiner

Ma's body was soaked in sweat – pooling under her armpits, soaking her pyjamas with half-moons, and dripping off the end of her wide nose. She could not eat, and would only drink powdery shakes Pa mixed for her twice a day. She would lift her soggy head from the pillow as Pa walked into their bedroom, kept dimly lit, with the tall glass of chocolate milk balanced on a tray. He would bend the straw towards her mouth and beg her to suck up the nourishing liquid, then hold her as she fought down the tidal waves of nausea, until Pa left for work, when she hurled the half-curdled milk into the chamber pot near her bed, urine and vomit spraying over the sides onto the floorboards.

The night before my eleventh birthday, Ma's body, in an attempt to rid itself of the anonymous virus, flared up hot like a gas flame. Pa, dozing in the twin bed beside her, and me too, woke to her delirious half moans and raspy breaths. He flicked on the bedside lamp, filling the room with a faint orange glow, and jumped at the sight of Ma, her coal-round eyes glazed over, flinging herself wildly around the bed, the sheets tangled in a twisted rope around her trembling body.

'Alette! Alette!' Pa called, as if the real person was trapped, buried deep inside the writhing creature in front of him. He shook her at the shoulders, and she mumbled his name between breathless pants.

'Pa, what's wrong?' I stood in the doorway like a frail ghost in my white nightie, my brown hair in a crumpled mess from sleep.

'Marie, sweetie, I need you to go fill a bucket of ice and bring me all the dish cloths you can find,' he said frantically, yanking at the knot of bed sheets and tossing them to the floor. I stood still for a minute, looking through frightened eyes at Ma thrashing on the bed as if she were possessed by something not quite human. Pa yelled, 'Now, Marie!' and I bolted down the passage and into the kitchen where I fumbled in

the darkness, tripping over a dirty plate that had been left on the floor that evening after supper. I reached the deep freeze in the corner of the cluttered kitchen and groped around in it, my fingers turning sore and stiff as I chucked containers of frozen mince and month-old left-overs aside, until I felt the lumpy packet of ice cubes. When I ran back into the room, Sussie, my younger sister, was standing with her back against the door frame, watching with watery eyes as Pa cut Ma's blue nightie off her body with the pair of metal sewing scissors he had found in the bedside drawer. Her belly and breasts spilt from the cut fabric. I handed the bucket of ice and dish cloths to my father, whose white vest was transparent with perspiration.

'Pa, what's wrong with Ma?' Sussie murmured, her thumb pressed against the roof of her mouth.

'Sussie, it's going to be okay,' I placed my hand – still cold from rummaging in the deep freeze – in hers, squeezing her fleshy fingers and swallowing the fear that heaved in my chest like bile.

'Marie, Sussie, help me pack these cloths with ice, okay?'

I pulled a rigid Sussie by the arm and together, in tense silence, we knelt on either side of the bucket, packing the cloths with sticky clusters of ice that Pa then placed against Ma's head, neck, and legs as if he were trying to keep her from rotting.

'Ben, Ben!' Ma shrieked, bolting upright in the bed, her pale face contorted with sudden panic.

'What is it Alette?' he asked.

'What do you want?' Ma shouted, staring at an invisible spot on the edge of her bed. She pushed her body against the headboard, her head rising above it to thump against the wall with a hollow thud.

'Alette?' Pa said, his voice cracking slightly as he slapped her cheeks, willing her to look at him, but her black eyes remained fixed, frozen with fear at the spot at the end of the bed.

'Ma?' Sussie cried, leaping instinctively towards her with outstretched arms the way she used to when she was first learning to walk.

I yanked her back, 'Sussie, no!' – protecting her with my arm around her shoulders, my eyes unable to leave Ma's petrified face.

'I'm not going with you!' Ma yelled and grabbed at one of the ice packs that had started to leak, the melting ice spilling into the sodden mess of the bare mattress, and chucked it at the edge of the bed. The

ice ball splintered against the door frame, bits of ice exploding. Sussie screamed and buried her head in the trembling crook of my arm.

'Alette what is it? What do you see?' Pa shouted, pleading with her, holding her face between his hands, staring into her vacant eyes.

She did not blink as she curled herself into a foetal position against the bed frame. 'It's Him,' she whispered hoarsely, her breath spewing in short bursts from between tightly held lips.

'Who?' Pa asked, placing his hand against Ma's flaming forehead.

'The Devil,' she whispered, turning her face away from Pa.

I gasped and looked anxiously around the room for the creature with bull horns, a long tail and a pitchfork that I had seen in picture Bibles at Sunday school. Obscure shadows, of the dressing table, cupboard and twin beds, loomed over us, ominous splodges which began to morph into vulgar monsters. I turned my face away from the encroaching blackness.

'It can't be, Alette. There is no one there,' I heard Pa say.

I hugged Sussie closer to me, her tiny chest heaving with uncontrollable sobs.

'He's there,' Ma was adamant. 'He's watching me, he wants me to come with him,' her voice broke into an hysterical whisper.

'What does he look like?' Pa asked, feigning curiosity as he motioned to Sussie and me to carry on packing the dish cloths with ice. We untangled from each other's protective grip and reached into the bucket to retrieve the last few stubborn cubes that had refused to melt.

'He's tall, dressed in black,' she shivered slightly as Pa held a leaky icepack to the back of her neck. 'He's sitting on the edge of the bed, he's looking right at me, his eyes are black too,' her eyes remained fixed on the spot, 'His hair is oily, tied back. He's wearing pointed shoes.' Her voice was becoming sleepy, muffled as the fiery fever began to release its hold on her.

'Ssh,' Pa perched on the side of the bed, and hugged Ma to him as she closed her eyes, the fever dissolving with the ice pressed against her bare skin. 'It's all right now; he won't get you as long as I'm here.'

I took Sussie's wet hand, quietly leading her from the room, and we emptied the bucket of water in silence, afraid that if either of us spoke Ma would start ranting about the man in black being in the room with us. Perhaps he would come to the back room while we slept and take us away. Sussie was a tight knot of terror and she clung to me as we

navigated our way down the passage and into the back bedroom, careful not to look into any dark corners for fear of seeing the Devil. Sussie and I crawled quickly back into the double bed we shared with our baby sister, Karin, who lay softly snoring, one chubby leg dangling over the edge. It was nearly morning and the sky outside the window had begun to change colour, quickly and unevenly like a cheap kaleidoscope out of a lucky packet. I wrapped my arms tightly around Sussie as a family of tits began tweeting outside the window.

'Happy birthday, Marie,' Sussie whispered into the pillow, but my mind was a stuck record of Ma's rambling voice as she described the man in black who wanted to take her away.

The following day, Ma was diagnosed with typhoid fever. I spent the better part of my birthday sitting in the waiting room at the Elizabeth Donkin hospital, the silence punctuated by the roar of aeroplanes overhead as they took off from the nearby Port Elizabeth airport. The hospital was a series of grey-green buildings clustered together on a hill hunkering in the shadows of a row of blue gum trees, the branches of which tilted ominously towards the hospital like gnarled fingers. Inside, the hospital was dark, and cold and the waiting room smelt strongly of antiseptic and vomit. Sussie, Karin and I sat on plastic chairs with crooked legs, holding hands as Pa had instructed us to do before he had disappeared down a corridor pushing Ma, limp as a rag doll, in a stainless steel wheelchair.

The waiting room was empty except for a group of nurses who clucked around the glassed-in reception desk, occasionally stealing pitiful glances at us over their thick-rimmed glasses, and shaking their Doris Day hairdos at each other.

'Is Ma going to die?' Sussie whispered, the whites of her eyes red from crying.

'What's die?' Karin asked her podgy face innocent and matter-of-fact underneath her blonde fringe.

'It's nothing,' I said, plastering a mechanical smile on my face until my cheeks hurt, 'Ma's going to be fine.'

Pa trudged back into the waiting room twenty minutes later rubbing his fists against his eyes, his work boots squeaking against the freshly mopped linoleum floor.

‘Where’s Ma?’ I asked, peering behind Pa towards the double doors through which I’d seen both of them disappear earlier.

Pa knelt down, taking up one of my nail-bitten hands, he said: ‘Ma is very sick.’

‘Is she going to die?’ I whispered, so that Sussie and Karin would not hear.

‘No, she isn’t,’ Pa said too quickly, ‘but she will have to stay in the hospital for a few days.’

‘What about my birthday?’ I asked.

That morning, Pa had called me into the kitchen, and I had gasped when I saw a box the size of me leaning against the kitchen table. I could feel pins and needles in my stomach as I wondered what could be concealed underneath the wrapping. Pa, Sussie and Karin sang ‘Happy Birthday To You’ quietly so as not to wake Ma as I carefully removed the pieces of Christmas wrapping paper recycled after the opening of last year’s gifts, and pulled out a pink and purple box with a picture of a large doll on the front. I squealed with delight as I lifted the cardboard lid and, on tip-toes, with Pa’s help, pulled a life-sized doll with wide blue eyes, red lips, and silky brown hair, from her cardboard home.

‘Thank you, Pa!’ I smiled, hugging the hard, plastic doll.

‘What’s her name?’ Karin asked admiring the doll’s moveable arms and legs and red and white polka dot dress.

I thought for a minute, scrutinising the doll’s empty eyes, ‘Lynette,’ I said, looking up at Pa for approval and he nodded, and patted me on the head.

‘I tell you what,’ Pa put his hand awkwardly on my shoulder as he led us towards the front doors of the hospital, and away from our mother, ‘let’s go home and make a bed for Lynette to sleep in tonight.’ Pa said he had just enough plywood in the garage to fashion a make-shift cot for the doll.

‘Tonight, she can sleep in her own bed next to you.’

I was quiet for a moment before smiling, the sadness melting from my face, ‘I can make her a pillow.’

For the next six weeks, while Ma lay dying in a hospital ward, Pa played mother. Each morning, he cooked milky Jungle Oats for breakfast while Sussie and I knelt on kitchen chairs in front of the kitchen counter assembling thick, peanut butter sandwiches for our school lunches. We

worked like a well-oiled machine – I sliced the bread with a bread knife and spread the margarine and clumps of crunchy peanut butter onto the chunks of bread, and Sussie wrapped the sandwiches in tin foil, cheekily running a finger along the crusts, licking the bits of peanut butter that squeezed out between the slices, before stuffing them into our school bags. Little Karin went to playschool on a bus with a colourful cartoon drawing of two penguins in bow ties sitting beside an igloo painted across the side. With her purple satchel strapped awkwardly to her back, she'd skip down the steep front steps calling, 'Bye-pa!'

Pa visited Ma three nights a week after work and whenever Sussie or Karin asked about her, he would smile the same tired, frayed smile and say, 'She's just fine.' But I'd see a different story in his eyes, and the empty cavern that had formed in my stomach the night Ma got sick would grow a little wider.

One afternoon two months later, when Sussie and I got home from school Pa was sitting in the living room, hunched in one of the armchairs, elbows on his knees.

'Pa, why are you home so early?' Sussie asked, promptly perching herself on his lap.

Pa said nothing, and I watched with a growing sense of dread as he picked at bits of imaginary thread on the hem of Sussie's blue school uniform.

'Is Ma dead?' I felt my breath catch in the back of my throat.

'No, my love.' Pa looked up at me with mild surprise and smiled. 'Your Ma is better, she's coming home.'

Sussie laughed and hugged Pa tightly around the neck, while I stood studying Pa's face – the dark rings under his eyes, the deep wrinkles on his forehead and cheeks that seemed to have appeared overnight, and the scar above his top lip where a swing had hit him as a young boy – to find signs that he was lying.

'Really?' I asked, my eyes, the same brown as Pa's, narrowing with suspicion.

He reached for my hand and squeezed it tightly, the calluses on his fingers tickling my skin, 'Really,' he said quietly.

I felt the relief begin to rise inside me, starting at the broken soles of my school shoes and moving up like hot air through to my throat where it lodged in a suffocating sob. Pa pulled me into a strong hug as my face collapsed and I cried; he held me tightly as the pain and anger

and fear of the past six weeks wracked my body, dissolving into the echoing emptiness of our house.

That evening, I rode with Pa by bus to the hospital to fetch Ma. The air was thick with the smell of medicine and antiseptic. Pa pushed open one of the doors in a long corridor and led me into a ward lined with rows of wrought-iron beds on either side of the narrow space. A bald woman with transparent, yellowish skin sat limp and pale in the bed nearest the door, an overnight bag resting beside her. I stared with a mixture of confusion and horror as the woman glanced up at me and raised her hand in a frail wave.

I turned away from the strange woman whose cracked lips opened and closed like a goldfish trapped in an aquarium, no words escaping. I watched in shock as Pa strode towards the hollow-cheeked woman and placed a tender kiss on her cleanly shaven head. This woman staring at me from across the room with eyes both alien and familiar.

This woman who was holding onto Pa's hand could not be Ma.

'Marie, come say hello,' Pa said, smiling at Ma, who began to pluck at the bed sheets underneath her thin frame.

I shook my head, and stepped backwards, my foot colliding with a metal chair, the sound of it clattering bringing me to my senses.

Ma touched her head self-consciously and then reached her hand towards me, a hand blue from the pricks of needles of dozens of drips that had pierced her skin. 'Don't be scared, Marie,' she whispered, her voice dry and achy. 'It's me.'

I looked at Ma's thin hand and then at Pa, who stood beside Ma's bed like a bodyguard in his thick black coat. Pa placed his hands delicately on her protruding shoulders as if even his gentle touch might leave bruises on her fragile body, and he nodded his head at me and winked with assurance. I gulped and walked hesitantly towards Ma. Her skeletal fingers curled around my hand and I smiled as Ma gave my hand a faint, familiar squeeze, 'Did you miss me?'

I nodded, suddenly shy.

'Tell Ma about Lynette,' Pa said.

And I did. I told her about the bed Pa had built for my new doll the afternoon of my birthday, and how I had found bits of sponge and foam and sewn a pillowcase out of scraps of material from Ma's old sewing box.

‘She sleeps next to our bed,’ I looked up at Ma’s drawn face, ‘She keeps the man dressed in black away.’ That tall man with the greasy black ponytail and pointy shoes, leering down at us, beckoning us into Hell. Lynette protected us from the Devil.

‘What are you talking about, Marie?’ Ma looked at me, and pulled me to her and I hugged her and I smiled.

Wings on Indi's Pillow

Claudie Muchindu

'I can't sleep. The bat in my brain keeps flapping its wings. People should stop selling books that claim to help you still your mind. They're all unhelpful. They're like books on public speaking ... Here I go again, I'm supposed to be calming down and here I am thinking of arbitrary things ... André isn't having any trouble sleeping. He's really asleep. I can hear the slight whistle of his exhalations ... I should be grateful he doesn't snore.

No! I shouldn't be grateful for anything he does for me. I don't owe him anything.'

Indi got up, trying not to wake her partner, although she knew it would take more than her shifting weight to do that. After drinking a glass of water, she made her way back to the bed, climbed in and gently put an arm around André's waist. Resting it on his protruding belly she gently stroked the ring of red hair around his belly button. He moaned and there was a moment where the whistling stopped but once she could hear it again she took her hand from his side and turned back to writing in her journal. André had bought her the journal hoping late-night writing would help her relax and eventually fall asleep. It wasn't working so far.

'My head is clogged. Like a murky drain ... no, that's wrong. It's more like the bat we freed from the hammock last week flew up my nose and got stuck in my head and it's fluttering about trying to get free but can't and the stupid thing just keeps getting more tangled. That's a horrible image, those leathery wings, warm, animalistic, yet delicate ... almost like skin on an aging corpse, not a decomposing one but an aging one. If time felt made of anything it would be of a quilt of quivering bat's wings. That analogy – of bats being 'rats with wings' – doesn't do the repulsiveness justice. An ugly

creature that doesn't belong is fighting its way out of my head but just ends up getting buried deeper, it will soon drive into my heart and eventually I won't be able to differentiate between it and me.'

'Babe, I'm convinced you don't want to sleep at all.'

Indi was startled to find André staring at her with a huge smile on his face.

'Did my light wake you?' she asked, turning her reading light off

'No, your voice did. You were talking to yourself,' he said, reaching for her.

'Really, I still do that?' She put the journal away and snuggled up close to him.

'I love your voice, but I wish you could sleep,' he whispered into her dark, curly hair.

'The Keeper of Dreams isn't giving me a key,' Indi said into his chest, burrowing as he held her tighter.

'Not even a glimpse through the keyhole?' André asked.

'He's giving me bat's wings to work with,' she said with a little giggle

'Are you writing that bat story in to your next article?' he asked, stroking her back.

She shrugged. 'My readers aren't going to want to read that.'

'You could make it work,' he said lightly, still stroking her. 'You know, it's been a while since you wrote any poetry. Why don't you try putting something together? Put the bats there and see if they settle,' he offered, pulling her away from him to look at her face in the darkness.

'You want a poem, now?' she asked. She could make out the outline of his face as he nodded at her, so she snuggled in close and they were silent for a few minutes, as Indi tried to visualise a poem in her head. She couldn't remember the last time she had done it, but it was refreshing to try.

*'She glides on a river of time
leathery wings holding her afloat*

*She cradles a nest of dreams,
unbroken and waiting*

*There'll be no ring for our winged princess
because her bearer lost it in the marshes*

*Hidden in sheets of tears
she'll hide her hope*

and flee.'

She was silent for a moment, listening to André breathing. She lifted her head to stare at him in the dark.

'You want to get married?' he asked and she laughed.

'You think because I mentioned a ring I want to get married?' she asked with a smile. 'No, I don't want to get married ... Mum popped into my head as I was thinking that,' she said rolling onto her back.

He propped himself up on his elbow and continued to stroke her belly in long, un-hurried brushes against her skin. He traced his finger along her ribcage, down to her slender waist and shapely hips. She rolled onto her side to look at him, putting a hand on his chest.

'Your hands are like ice,' he said with a chuckle.

'I drank a glass of cold water a few minutes ago,' she said feebly.

'Unless it was liquid nitrogen it's not a reason,' he said placing his own hand over hers and let his warmth spread to her cool fingers.

'My mother used to say cold hands are a sign of a warm heart ... could have been an Irish saying,' he added as an afterthought.

'My mum used to say that my cold hands were a warning of my temper,' she said with a laugh.

André began kissing her finger tips, each one of them slowly and leisurely before tracing his lips along her palm.

It's okay when we hold each other in the dark, she thought. You can't see that we look like a cheap dessert ... vanilla and chocolate ice cream. You should only pick one flavour. People who mix ice cream flavours are compensating for the fact that they were only allowed one flavour as children.

'We need a new mattress,' she blurted as his lips tickled her wrists and she pulled her hand away. She wasn't sure where the thought had come from but it was here and needed to be shared.

The bats are really hard at work tonight, she thought.

‘We can’t get one right now. Its five in the morning,’ André said with a laugh.

‘But we need a new one, this one is too hard and uncomfortable,’ she said.

‘Don’t you mean lumpy?’

‘I understand English just fine, thank you very much,’ she snapped.

‘I just don’t know how hard a mattress can be after a year of ... softening,’ he said, closing the gap between them.

‘You’re being condescending. You can’t resist a chance to look down on me,’ she spat.

He sighed. ‘You’ll always have a much better “*command*” of the language than I will. Heaven knows you remind me often enough,’ he said.

She could hear the agitation in his voice but she couldn’t stop herself. ‘You don’t believe that. You’ve always believed you’re better than me ... know more than me,’ she said, her volume beginning to rise.

‘Are we going to have this argument now?’ André rolled away from her onto his side and Indi sat up, switching on the light. He covered his eyes with his forearm.

‘Yes we are,’ she said staring at him. ‘You don’t respect me.’

‘Where the hell did *that* come from?’ he said from behind his arm. The irritation was gone from his voice, only fatigue remained.

‘This bed’ she said.

‘*This* bed?’ he asked.

‘Yes, you made a choice to get it on your own. You didn’t consult me,’ she said moving his arm so she could see his eyes.

‘The bed was a surprise, our first building block for our future together,’ he said.

His voice sounded very heavy but Indi didn’t care. ‘No, it was you cutting me out of a decision affecting both of us. I hate the mattress and this nasty headboard. Why the hell would you think I would want to sleep with this bondage contraption looming over me?’

He groaned ‘You like being tied up to that ‘bondage contraption’,’ he reminded her.

‘If this was the foundation then it’s not a stable one,’ she concluded with an air of triumph.

'But you chose everything else. The pillows. You picked these white sheets –'

'Ivory,' she cut him off.

'What?' He looked at her.

'The colour is ivory, not white' she repeated, blinking at him.

'What does it matter?' he said, shrugging it off.

'If they're not white, you shouldn't call them white,' she said.

Oh, for heavens sake Indi, enough of the shades of colour thing. There's not that much difference between ivory and white is there? They look white to me,' he said.

They both stared at the sheets and she had to concede that under the glare of her fluorescent bedside lamp the sheets looked distinctly white.

He was silent for a moment then let out a long sigh.

'You're never going to lose your hang-ups about us,' he said, not as a question but a mere state of fact.

She blinked at him. 'I don't have hang ups about us,' she said defensively.

'Oh, come on. You've had them as long as I've known you. But since I opened up the studio it's become worse, a lot worse. The more paintings I sell the more it's as if you feel you need to prove something. What the hell it is I don't know.' The fatigue was still in his voice, and the tone of it only made her feel angrier.

'You don't get to judge me!' she yelled at him.

He sat up and stared at her so directly that she couldn't hold his gaze. She dropped her eyes.

'I have loved you from the first moment I saw you,' he said. 'For three years I've given you everything I can give and you don't think it hurts me when I hear you *'explain'* our relationship to people? Even to strangers who don't matter? Like that waiter last week. What business is it of his whether we've been together since all I could afford was 'crackers, water and a room with just a mattress'?'

He got off the bed and walked over to the windowsill; leaning against it he looked at her.

'The first time I saw you, you were giving that poetry reading at George's. I thought you were the most interesting person I had ever met. I wish you were doing more poetry instead of writing about 'societal issues'. All that's done is harden your view of the world and you don't even

enjoy it all that much. But, of course, it's a 'real job' and 'respectable.' He paused and she looked up at him. He was staring at her bra on the floor. 'You aren't comfortable in your skin and I seem to make it worse. No matter how many times I tell you I love your face, your smile, the way your hand looks in mine, you won't hear it, can't hear it. Your black skin doesn't bother me but my white skin does you in.'

Indi opened her mouth to say something but a weird sensation had been settling over her since André had started speaking. It was as if those leathery wings were no longer only in her head. They were beating about all over her skin.

'If the colour of the sheets is that important to you, fine but they look white to me. If my success with my painting means we can't get along because you're a struggling writer, fine. If I have been a test for you to see whether you can really break some of your own personal boundaries, then that's a sad truth, but whatever it is, you need to make peace with who you are. I can't live with you constantly trying to validate our relationship.'

'I *do* love you,' Indi blurted. 'You mean a lot to me.' She leaped from the bed, the sensation of fluttering wings on her skin burning her more than André's words. She needed to escape from it all somehow.

'It's just 'complicated', right?' he said crossing his arms.

'It not really my fault.' She could hear a strange hysteria in her voice; the bat wings – they were making her sound a little crazy.

'Indi, you own what goes on in your head.' She could hear that he was holding back his agitation again.

She wanted to touch him but couldn't, the crawling sensation on every bit of exposed skin was almost unbearable.

'We have to get a new bed' she said, pleading and hating herself for it. If André continued to speak, she would begin to feel claws scratching and mincing her skin and then she might just go mad.

André held her arms tightly then, and his hands were dreaded claws on her arms. She let out a yelp and shrugged from his grip before the sensation could take hold, before his bat-like teeth could sink in.

She closed her eyes to calm down.

'I want to be with you,' she whimpered.

'You're not ready. You're always going to have some ghost to put in between us and if you can't, you'll make one up,' he said sadly, as she

finally allowed him to hold her. The flapping had ceased, his hold was keeping the bats at bay and Indi kept close to him.

André's grip tightened around her. 'Find someone who shares your views on colour, go home and sort out your issues with your mother – do whatever it takes – but know that I love you. It's that simple.'

He let go and walked to the bathroom. She heard the shower as she reached for her journal, feeling more tired than she had ever felt.

André eases the leathery medley. I should be grateful ... and yet I am not. I want to believe I loved him but I have to wonder if I was simply trying to mix my ice cream and ignore the whisper in my head telling me that mixing those flavours simply doesn't work for me.

*There's no prison
if a cage has no bars*

*The tale never had a fairy
with a wand to wave 'Happy'*

*The Ever After has arrived
and it's a vast cold plain ...*

*Lonely Princess, leave the throne
and with featherless wings,*

fly.

As Indi stretched on the bed, her fatigue took hold and the bats in her brain were finally set loose. For the first time in months, Indi slept.

How to Write a Good Romance

Ginny Swart

‘You didn’t tell me it was *pink*!’

Val winced at Tom’s outraged tone. Defensively, she stroked the smooth leather upholstery of the chaise longue. It may have been pink, but it was perfect.

The carved legs curled elegantly beneath it and the contoured headrest hinted at whiling away languid afternoons reading romantic books. Wearing one of those low necked, flowered-sprigged dresses with puffed sleeves. Emma. Elizabeth Bennett. Lying back and flirting with Regency beaus in flared riding coats and ruffled shirts with those tousled curls and long sideburns ... and those tight-fitting moleskin trousers.

Stop it Val.

‘Well, it is leather. You know we’ve always wanted a leather armchair or something. And this is much better. Besides, it was so cheap – I couldn’t let it stay where it was!’

‘Well I don’t think you can let it stay in the lounge either. Not without covering it with something. It’s awful.’ Tom glared at her. ‘What on earth possessed you? We’ve got a perfectly good sofa already.’

Oh dear. She knew she should have phoned Tom to come and have a look before she bought it on impulse at the Hatfield market. But she’d seen it standing alone, vivid against the surrounding tatty junk and had walked over as if drawn by a magnet. She had sat down on it and unbidden, her body automatically stretching out, her feet had kicked off their shoes, lifted themselves and caressed the pink leather. She had wiggled her toes and then leant back, the word tranquil coming to mind. Val knew she had to have this in her life.

'Lovely piece of furniture, isn't it?' asked the ferrety looking man who appeared suddenly. 'Classy. A *jazzlongey's* what they call this. Old fashioned but very stylish. You see 'em in all the best houses.'

'Yes. I'm sure you do,' said Val. Chatsworth. Kedlestone Hall. They would have had similar pieces although probably not upholstered in pink leather. This chaise longue must have belonged to a fairly eccentric person. Or one of those madly fashionable interior designers going through a pink period.

She was prepared to haggle, but his price had been so reasonable she almost laughed out loud. And he'd even thrown in free delivery that same day.

Warmed by the glow of her success, she'd kept opening the door and enjoying the sight of this exotic addition to their furniture. Like a flamingo in a pond full of drab brown ducks.

'Perhaps it *is* a bit too – er – pink. Maybe with a few cream cushions to soften it ...?'

'Then it'll look like a strawberry ice cream.'

Val was crushed by Tom's reaction, when all afternoon she'd been waiting for him to come home and admire her triumph.

Privately, she had to admit the brightly coloured chaise longue was a little out of place next to their faded floral sofa and the cane armchairs which Tom's mother had given them as a wedding present. But it was divinely comfortable and even though the leather was soft and wrinkled with age, it still released that rich smell of genuine leather and the contours embraced her like a familiar love.

After lunch the next afternoon when Tom was at work, she found an Indian cotton throw and draped it over the offending pink. This would surely satisfy him, now that only the head rest showed its true colours? Even if it didn't, she wasn't prepared to give up this treasure.

She made herself a cup of filter coffee and treated herself to the last poppy-seed muffin in the box. Then collected the post and brought it through to the lounge. She sat on the chaise longue and opened her letters.

The phone bill and three rejections.

'Thank you for your submission which we have read with interest, but'

Always a 'but'. Never a '*And we'd like to offer you ...*'

‘The Editor regrets ...’ That made the seventh identical one-liner from that regretful editor. Maybe she should give up sending to her. The woman either didn’t like period romances or suffered from a permanent bad-hair day.

She’d heard from the more successful members of her writer’s circle that acceptance of a story could be very personal, and if one editor didn’t like, another one could. It was just a matter of growing a skin like a rhino and plugging away. Val had tried, but she remained as thin-skinned and sensitive to rejection as ever.

The most promising rejection, clipped to her returned manuscript of ‘Lady Anne and the Count of Bohemia’ had a handwritten sentence added to the printed formula: ‘Engaging writing style but I’d like to see more emotion and feel more real passion.’

Oh dear.

Val had long suspected that her stories were lacking something. But *emotion*? *Passion*? Not that she didn’t like sex but she didn’t feel confident writing steamy scenes at all. She enjoyed reading them of course. Within limits. Not those nasty modern stories where everything was described in graphic detail, and the seduction, if you could call it that, was rushed and hard and full of technical details. She read these with her toes curled, and sometimes skipped the whole page. But in Regency romances, with the gradual, inevitable build-up of tension between the hero and the heroine, when you just knew they’d come together in the end after a few hiccups, she loved those. The path to true happiness was always sprinkled with flowery declarations of true love and undying affection and at the end, the writer, being sensible of her reader’s feelings, decorously drew a red velvet curtain around the four-poster. Everything that followed was left to the imagination. Just how a good romance should end, in Val’s opinion.

Obviously this editor had other ideas. Maybe she wanted chick-lit: something witty and sassy and – oh dear. Sexy. Val knew she couldn’t write that.

Three years of submitting period romances to all the women’s magazines didn’t make rejections any less depressing. Val had a drawer full of them, every one a knife in the heart and a further paragraph added to the litany of her failures and disappointments.

‘Another one?’ asked Tom, stabbing at his breakfast egg while she shed tears over the last rejection. ‘Chuck ’em away. You’re never going

to read them again, are you? Just wait for your first letter of acceptance then frame it.'

'I wish I had your confidence, darling.'

'Listen sweetheart, if getting one of those short-sighted editors to buy one of your stories is what you want, then just wait. All good things come to those who wait.'

But she knew he didn't really take her writing seriously. Once he'd finished the sports page, Tom was more of John Grisham, Jeffery Archer sort of reader.

She sighed and put the latest rejections in the drawer. Where to send Lady Anne's story next? Maybe she should try submitting *The Chatsworth Castle Affair* to this editor instead. She put her feet up and leaned back, sighing again, deeply.

Then suddenly the sitting room door was flung open and a ravishing young girl in a robin's-egg blue Regency dress stormed across the room, a diamond comb restraining a tumultuous mop of blond curls.

'God's blood! I'll see him damned before I submit to his evil intentions!' Tears of rage sparkled on the long dark lashes that fringed her sapphire-blue eyes, and impatiently she wiped them away. There was a peremptory knock on the door and she swung round, her small chin tilted defiantly to meet the smouldering gaze of the tall handsome man who stood there, breathing heavily.

'Lady Anne! You will learn that you cannot trifle with my affections!' The Count strode across to her and swept her into his arms in a crushing embrace.

'Indeed, Sir ...!' Lady Anne resisted with spirit but his passionate kisses could not be denied ...

'Mom, I need bus money for soccer practice.' Brendan stood next her, back from school. 'Were you asleep? It's only three o'clock!'

'No ... er. No.' Yanked back into the present, Val sat up. 'Where's my purse? Here, take what you need.'

'And money for an ice cream?'

'Fine. Yes. Just go, you'll be late.'

Stunned, she waited impatiently for her son to leave the room. I've got to get that down on paper, she thought, that's exactly how I would have filmed the scene with Lady Anne and the Count. But where did it come from? I know I wasn't asleep.

With shaking fingers she found a notebook and wrote down what she could remember: the Count had been wearing a starched white cravat and a dark green broadcloth tailcoat with a high collar and a double row of brass buttons. Perfect!

In the third paragraph she'd mentioned that he was acquainted with Beau Brummel so it stood to reason he'd be a dandy. But never a fop, not with that fire in his eyes. Her heart beat faster just thinking about him.

She read what she'd written with deep satisfaction. Spot on, she thought. Loads of passion!

That night when Tom had taken himself off to an early bed, and Brendan was busy with a computer game in his room, Val switched on her computer and started to rewrite the story from the beginning. Everyone said a true writer rewrote and rewrote and she was quite prepared to change everything if she needed to.

'Waiting for the London coach, the beautiful Lady Anne Cheveril anxiously paced the floor in her hired rooms at the Brideswell Tavern on Thornhill Green.'

Then what? Nothing flowed. She stared at the blank screen for over an hour before giving up and going to bed. Where were the perfectly chosen words that had rushed out onto the page that morning? Maybe she'd do better writing the whole thing in longhand but that was so slow. Or maybe she'd be better off taking up pottery and not trying to write at all.

The next day she woke with a sore head. Thank goodness it was Saturday, with Tom and Brendan gone off to watch soccer together. As soon as she'd seen them out of the door and washed the breakfast things, Val retired with the weekend paper to the pink chaise longue. It was extraordinarily comfortable and the aged leather seemed to give in all the right places, willing her to lean back and relax.

Not for long.

Horses whinnied loudly as carriage wheels crushed the gravel below her window and a gruff voice shouted, 'All change for Brideswell Tavern!'

The young girl she recognised as Lady Anne, all of twenty with flushed cheeks and rosebud lips, stood by the window, biting her lip and peering anxiously through the grimy lace curtains. She was clad in a

white, high-waisted morning dress of muslin, her blonde hair swept up into a mass of curls secured by a flowered bandeau.

‘Now remember what you are to tell them, Mabel,’ she said to her maid, who was standing behind her mistress, wringing her hands. ‘On no account are my parents to concern themselves over my expedition.’

‘Oh Lady Anne, your mother will be uncommon vexed, indeed I fear things will not go well with me if I tell her you are gone to London by yourself. Without even a chaperone or companion.’

‘Fiddlesticks, Mabel, she knows full well how I feel about Lord D’Arcy’s attentions. I will be perfectly safe at Lady Caroline’s house in Grosvenor Square.’

‘But Lady Anne, how shall I answer if she quizzes me about the Count? She has taken so strong against him. She says he’s a swarthy foreigner and not to be trusted.’

‘Never mind about the Count. I shall write to her when I arrive and explain everything. Now assist me with my portmanteau and let me be away.’ Without a backward glance, Lady Anne left the room and descended the stairs, Mabel hurrying after her.

As the front door clicked shut behind them, Val sat up excitedly. It had happened again. It was all there for her to write down, quickly, before she lost it. She picked up her notebook and started writing furiously.

‘Don’t laugh Tom, but I’m sure it’s got something to do with this chaise longue,’ she said a few evenings later as they were relaxing on it in front of the television. ‘Every time I lie back on here I’m inspired,’ she said, feeling the texture of the weathered leather under her fingertips. ‘It’s as if the story is happening right in front of me and what I write is so much better than anything I’ve done before.’

‘You’re such a silly pumpkin,’ he said comfortably, snuggling up next to Val and drawing her close. ‘Your writing’s lovely. It’s going well because you’re getting more experienced. Just wait, you’ll have a story accepted soon. They’ll be lining up to buy your stuff.’

‘Do you think so? I wish.’

He kissed her cheek and then turned her face to his. Surprised, she saw a look in his eye that had been missing for a long time. Too long.

‘Val my love,’ he murmured, folding her in his arms and kissing her eyes and nose and finally, her lips. ‘Val ...’

‘Tom! Not in here! What if Brendan ...’

‘He’s fast asleep,’ said Tom confidently. But he got up and locked the door anyway.

It was definitely the chaise longue. Every time Val relaxed on it, her story became alive. Words tumbled out, perfect period phrases that came from nowhere. A thousand words a day somehow found their way first into her notebook, and then onto her computer screen. When she read them she could tell they were exactly right. Her short story expanded into a full-length novel and it was brimming with emotion and passion. Two months later she knew it was ready to be sent off to a publisher.

And every time Tom sat down next to her after supper, he seemed to shed years and become the urgent young lover he once had been. Sometimes they skipped coffee entirely and almost never bothered to switch on the television any more. Not even Dr Who.

‘I wonder if it’s possible for furniture to be bewitched?’ Val asked her friend Rose, who had popped in for morning coffee. The disconcerting effect of the chaise longue had been worrying her for some time but it wasn’t anything she could discuss with her husband. Spells and enchantment weren’t subjects he’d consider even for a moment. ‘I know you’ll think it’s silly, but that chaise longue seems to have some sort of power over me.’ She was a bit shy to mention the effect it had on Tom. Some things needed the red velvet curtain.

‘You’re starting to write fairy stories now, are you?’ Rose grinned. ‘So you reckon it’s an antique chaise longue that’s being haunted by its first owner? A Regency aristocrat called Lady Anne? Maybe she was deflowered on it and she wants you to write a denouement? D’you think that’s possible?’

‘Don’t be daft. There wouldn’t have been pink leather in those days, anyway.’

Three days later, unable to contain her curiosity, Val was at the Hatfield Market, looking for the man who’d sold it to her.

‘You want old Henry?’ The man at the next stall chuckled. ‘He’s away for a while, love.’

‘Oh. I wanted to ask him something important.’ It would be more than interesting to know from where the chaise longue had come. ‘Will he be back tomorrow, d’you think?’

‘Henry will be gone for a few months. Her Majesty invited him to spend a little time as her guest.’

‘What? *Oh!*’ She realised what he meant. ‘What did Henry do?’

‘Nicked some stuff from that larny place outside the village. You remember that famous writer lady who died? Wrote all those love stories and romances, dripping in diamonds and so on? What was her name now ... Barbara someone ... anyway old Henry helped himself to a few bits and pieces that he found in an outside storeroom and the coppers didn’t like it. Six months without the option.’

Val went home numbly and lay back on her lovely pink chaise longue.

Was she guilty of receiving stolen goods? No wonder Henry had been in such a hurry to deliver it the same day. Should she tell the police?

The door opened. An elderly woman, ablaze with diamonds, entered. A vision in pink silk chiffon and white furs, her silvery coiffure set in a ripple of perfect waves and curls, she crossed the floor and stood imperiously at the foot of the chaise longue.

‘Don’t waste time, gel,’ she said crisply, ‘I started when I was twenty and I managed to write more than seven hundred books in my time. You’ve got a lot of work to do.’ She stroked the chaise longue affectionately. ‘Ah, what memories. If this could speak, what tales it would tell ...’ She glanced at Val wickedly from beneath heavily mascaraed eyelashes. ‘Have you found that as well?’

‘I – I have felt sort of inspired, lately,’ croaked Val. ‘And I seem to be writing faster.’

‘Good gel. You’ll probably be able to afford a secretary when you’ve sold your first ten books. Dictating from this is so much easier than sitting hunched in front of some dreadful machine. So bad for the posture. A man admires a woman who has a straight back.’ She turned regally and walked towards the door, her back as straight as Lady Anne’s. She paused a moment and looked back. ‘Remember Valerie, life is all about love. The love of a man for a woman and the love of a woman for a man. Nothing else matters.’

‘Yes. Right.’ Val swallowed, not sure if she was dreaming this time.

‘I suggest you set your next romance in France. That country has always appealed to me. D’ you know, it’s the only place where you can make love in the afternoon without people hammering on your door. *Such* an advantage.’ She drifted away in shimmer of furs, giving Val a little wave with her white-gloved hand.

Val sat up, automatically straightening her back. She could hear Lady Anne and the Count of Bohemia conversing in low, passionate whispers as they entered the room, Lady Anne radiant on the arm of the Count.

She reached for her pen.

The pink chaise longue was staying.

In Bed with Ikeji

Novuyo Rosa Tshuma

I met Ikeji at the Women's Agenda Forum, on one of those sweltering summer days with the clouds making empty threats and the air thick with the smell of rain. A plump woman blazoned in African attire with a high perm on her head was addressing the crowd.

The air was stale, unaffected by the fans sputtering overhead. I ached for the chill of winter, the way I always yearn for a slap of sun when my cheeks freeze in June. The woman seated next to me stank of sweat and I waved my programme vigorously for relief.

I noticed Ikeji because his Nigerian accent was thick and heavy when his hand shot up and he shouted, 'Excuse me, madam!'

The woman, done reeling statistics off a sheet of paper in a monotonous drone, was about to step down. She paused with one heavy leg on the podium. The orange of the flowers on her olive green dress clashed with her sooty skin and the puffed-up sleeves made her look bloated.

'What you have shared with us illustrates the vulnerability of women and children, does it not?'

The woman adjusted the spectacles pinching her nose. 'Yes it does,' she agreed.

'You have just read a clause that clearly states that women and children need to be *protected*, have you not?' Protected came out as *protactad*.

The woman pushed her spectacles back up her nose again, sensing a trap.

'That's what I said,' she said cautiously.

Ikeji punched the air as though he had just won a terrible victory. 'Then somebody please explain to me this issue of equality: how can

women be equal when women are clearly discussed on the same level as children, and it is clearly stated that we men should *protact* dem!’

It was extraordinary, the way the slumbering crowd broke into contention. The woman next to me waved her fat arms frantically in the air, exposing moist tufts of hair glistening from darkened armpits. I waved my programme with greater enthusiasm.

‘I *ask* you, is this not clear admission,’ Ikeji continued, shouting above the din, ‘that women are truly the weaker sex?’

I waited for the indignant protests to abate before I raised my hand and said,

‘If there were not so many men like you, who clearly miss the point, there would be no need to protect women.’

There was a cheer from the crowd. Ikeji didn’t respond, but I felt the pricking of his eyes at the back of my head throughout the remainder of the Forum. And later, as I avoided the struggle for tea and cake around the catering table, he approached me with two cups and said, ‘So what’s the point?’

‘Sorry?’

His eyes, the colour of autumn leaves, burned with intensity, he scrutinized me through rimless spectacles. ‘The point I’m missing, what is it?’

‘The point that empowering women is something that should be crucial to you as a man, as it adds to your well being.’

‘I see.’

He did not see.

I smiled thinly. ‘A change is happening as we speak. Women are rising to claim their place all over the world. They will continue to do so, with or without your participation, or permission.’

‘Ah. The victim has become the victor.’ He let out a superficial sigh. ‘But remember this. The goat that cries the loudest, does not necessarily eat the most.’

‘And the one that eats the most turns into a bully.’

He finally smiled. ‘You ‘women of progress’ seem to think that your education is a substitute for the goods dangling between our legs. A woman will never be a man my *sista*.’

I blinked repeatedly, taken aback by his crudeness. ‘I’m not your *sista*.’ The words came out with more venom than I had intended. I could have said more, a whole lot more, but I had heard this sort of attack too

many times before. 'Besides,' I went on, 'men like you have no power except the power to oppress women.'

'A line picked up from Robert D. Kaplan's *The Ends of the Earth*. How unoriginal,' he smirked and walked away.

I stood there, staring at his receding form, thought what an ugly posture he had, shoulders that were too thin and a behind that was too large for a man, and decided I was glad to see the back of him. Time hiccupped as I grappled with the humiliation, and I found myself seething as I pretended to admire a poster on the wall.

* * *

When I met Ikeji again, at the National Art Gallery, I wondered how many times we'd inadvertently bumped into each other before, strangers in a crowd, shoved together in a bank queue, brushing past each other on the street.

I was thinking of my flat mate, Simphiwe, as I stood, head tilted to one side, trying my best to appreciate what I thought to be rather blatant pornographic art. It was Simphiwe who had told me about the engaging exhibition by David Weisenbacher. That was the word she used, 'engaging', laughing, a twinkle in her eye. I teased that she must be dating some professor because she never used words like 'engaging' and determined to make time in my stifling schedule for a social breather. Art is not one of my friend's passions, it's actually mine. At one time I was inspired to become a painter, that is until everyone convinced me, rightly or wrongly, that it was, well, absurd.

Mama said: 'Art is a white people's thing; white people buy white people's art, and black people have no money to waste on things that don't make sense. Which black person has ever really made it as an artist?'

I didn't notice Ikeji at first; I didn't notice him at all, until he said, 'So the woman who challenges me is a lover of art.'

He was standing so close I could feel his breath, moist and warm on my ear; he smelled of peanut butter.

I turned to look at him as he turned to the painting I was appraising. He raised an eyebrow.

'Whoa,' he said, pretending to stagger backwards. 'What sort of rubbish is this now?'

The painting was a splash of red and yellow, depicting two men entangled in a passionate embrace. I was not sure what to make of the art myself, of the shocking effect, brutal homosexuality so graphically displayed in a public gallery in Zimbabwe. But my passion for art won me over, and I found myself springing up to David Weisenbacher's defence.

'I think it's a fair depiction of the state of present day society,' I said. 'Remember, what we are – what we deem to be *normal* and *acceptable* – is a construction of society. And that construction is ever shifting. And art is a complex thing, a fluid medium, used often to expand horizons, not stifle them. Good art should strip your intellectual barriers naked.'

'But there is nothing intellectual about *this*,' Ikeji swept his arm across the exhibition. 'This is – this is *illegal*.'

We looked at each other for a while. I wondered what it was about this man that drew me to him. I argued with him, I found him arrogant, yet I enjoyed the sparring. He was different from the Nigerians in town, who wore jeans so tightly moulded to their bits and buttocks, the cheeky men calling out as you walked by, 'Eish, beauti-*fool* woman, why you de no come ova here now!', wooing you with their wares, fake Gucci imitations and *zhing-zhong* electrical gadgets. In a Zimbabwe where the shelves gaped bare, where untidy queues littered the pavements and battered egos paraded the streets, the Nigerians had burst onto the scene with a flourishing entrepreneurialism, setting up shop in every street, many of them fronts for black market dealings. Mock imitations of Nigerian accents were springing up everywhere.

No, Ikeji's was a carefully managed appearance, a smooth jaw beneath a pampered baby-afro, burning eyes magnified by the lens of his specs, a drooping mouth, and flaring nostrils that twitched when we were arguing.

I remember wishing he wouldn't hold his hands like that, with the palms kissing each other. He reminded me of the robed statue of Jesus at Mama's Evangelical Church of The Saints, with His palms brought together in the intimate discussion of prayer, dead marble eyes gazing benevolently at His observer. It was such an inappropriate time for puritanical reminders, standing beneath the trussed roof of the Art Gallery, in humid midday air, gawking at David Weisenbacher's sinful pictures.

He shook his head, said, 'I just can't understand the art white people are crazy about.'

I countered that black people were too conservative and too afraid to think outside the box colonialism had shut them in. He said I was too white. I finally smiled; it was exactly what I had thought of my Zimbo friends when I was in England. Over there they pooled together and made an issue out of their Mugabe-ruled blackness, then when they came home they put on fake accents and acted too white.

'Are you an artist?' Ikeji asked.

'Medical doctor.'

His eyebrows, so bold it was like he had thickened them with eyeliner, made an arch. I expected he would say something chauvinistic like, 'You're too pretty to be a doctor.'

Instead he asked, 'Why do you say that with regret?'

I was taken aback. 'Say what with regret?'

'Say you're a doctor as though you dread the experience.'

I was taken aback by his ability to read the undercurrent carefully disguised by everyday speech, and laughed to hide my embarrassment, asked if he was psychic or something?

'No, I'm a writer, and I'm rapidly becoming interested in you as a character. Perhaps we could finish the conversation over a drink so I can apologise for turning my back on you the other day?'

We sat on the terrace of the Art Gallery Coffee Shop, gazed at the bronze mesh of a naked statue poised on a concrete slab on the lawn, the hand permanently shielding the eyes from a relentless sun. It was another one of those days when the sun is fierce, unforgiving, its rays scorching your temples, causing hammers to pound inside your head. I was glad for the coke, it fizzled on my tongue and gushed down my throat with a delicious coldness.

I hardly remember what we talked about that day. It was the usual banter of two people trying to pave paths into one another, searching beyond superficiality and shallow details for deeper meaning.

* * *

The first thing I noticed in his flat was the books. No, I lie, I only noticed those after sex, smoldering from the desire, so bold, so blinding, that had propelled us to his bed. With a white sheet scattered with blue flowers

firmly knotted beneath my armpits, I kept touching this, touching that, looking around his flat, waiting for the awkwardness to go away.

The books were everywhere, tattered novels and brand new volumes alike, sprawled on the low glass tables, lying face down on the wooden tiles of the floor, soaking up the spilt spices on the kitchen counter. The place looked like a library of sorts, *Africa Today*, *Things Fall Apart*, *The Life of Mandela*, *Iska*, *Idi Amin: The Terror*, *Mathematics at Degree Level*, all cohabitating in this allotropic space.

I noticed, in the lounge, a tall oak wood cabinet with sliding glass panels. I ran my hands over the cool wood, studied it with an exaggerated scrutiny. It was the type of ornate furniture of resplendent style that demanded to house crystal wine glasses or branded china, or, for Ikeji, leather bound volumes.

‘It came a few days ago, from my uncle in Nigeria,’ he explained, and started on a monologue about how his uncle was the best carpenter in all of Nigeria. ‘I came to Zim to help him set up the business.’

‘Tell me about Nigeria,’ I said.

He spoke of his father’s prestigious job as headmaster of the village school, of the ever increasing huts in his compound. Of the frenzy of Lagos, its stench of human sweat and rotting market wares and festering corruption. The dry dust of Harmattan.

I smiled, nodded, said I would like to visit Nigeria someday. I thought how different it all was, his life in Nigeria, from mine with Dad and Mama and the suburban house competing for status in Selborne Park. How little we knew of each other, and yet now, how much.

He began rambling, filling the awkwardness desire had created, until I took it up, saying how pretty this and how pretty that, how lovely this. I teased that there must be a woman living here, the wooden tiles were too shiny, the airy kitchen with red and white tiles too clean. He threw his hands up and confessed with a serious expression on his face, ‘You’ve caught me ... I live with my mother!’ I laughed until my sides ached.

He fingered the straw mats on the counter. ‘There’s a tribute performance to Dambudzo Marechera tomorrow night, at the Art Gallery. Not sure if I’ll manage to get fuel, but if I do would you like to go?’

‘Dambudzo Marechera, what type of art was he into, was he a painter?’

He looked at me long and hard. Then he frowned. 'You cannot be serious,'

'What, is the guy famous or something?' I asked.

'Is the guy famous or something?,' he mimicked. 'Dambudzo Marechera is one of your people's most talented writers and you ask if the guy is famous or something! Don't you read anything?'

'John Grisham?' I said hopefully.

'John Grisham' she says! His thick brows were brought together now. 'You know, this is something I don't understand: why don't black people support black artists? We take such pride in everything that's foreign because we think it's better!'

'That's the perception ...'

'So we have to wait for talent of our own making to be validated overseas before we appreciate it?' He was glaring at me, looking pent up, as if he was about to pounce on me at any moment.

'Desire may be extinguished for the moment, but obviously not your ability to articulate!'

We looked at each other, then burst out laughing as he pounced on me like an alley cat, all smiles as we wrestled to the floor.

I passed by Kingstons that day in search of a novel by Dambudzo Marechera. I found *Waiting for the Rain* by Charles Mungoshi instead. The empty book shelves languished despondently, so unlike the overflowing shelves at McAbbeys back in England where I used to faithfully devote time to my search for the latest John Grisham novel. When I got to the flat I shared with Simphiwe, I grabbed the Danielle Steel novel she was reading and slapped *Waiting for the Rain* onto her lap.

'It's high time we black people read black writers,' I said, hand on my hip, as though chastising her.

I felt like Ikeji's parrot and suddenly it irritated me.

* * *

Mama called, demanding a visit, complaining that I kept away for too long. It had been three weeks since Ikeji and I had met, weeks of reading, galleries, and the type of too-good-to-be-true sex you only read about in those soapy romance novels. We had visited the Art Gallery until we had exhausted everything on display, then we had visited it just for the sake of it, just to sit in the Coffee Shop and sip over priced juice and argue

about the carvings that bordered the terrace. When we were not at the Art Gallery, we were in Ikeji's flat, and when we were not on his bed, he was showing off his Mama's array of home made spices.

'Ever had egusi with efo?'

'Of course I've never had egusi with efo.'

'Well today you are going to have it. And this is not just any type of egusi with efo. This one you can only find in the Onukawa compound! Do you cook?'

'No, I don't cook.'

'You do not cook or you cannot cook?'

'I do not cook.'

'Ah, you 'women of progress'! No wonder you do not have a husband. You know the way to a man's heart is through his stomach?'

'And the way out of mine is to continue talking like that.'

'You anger easily. It's ok, if you cannot cook. I will make my special egusi with efo for you! After that, it will be jollof rice!'

'A few weeks ago, you wouldn't have been so docile.'

'Hmm, don't you know that the only way to keep a woman's mouth shut is to agree with everything she says?'

When Mama called, I was soaked in bubble bath, buried in the pages of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*.

'I'll come and see you tomorrow Mama.'

When I put down the receiver I couldn't help but smile. At least now I didn't have to put up with the ridiculous suitors Mama tried to pair me up with.

I was so happy that day, deliriously happy. Too happy. This new found happiness enveloped me with a new felt fragility I was wary of. I had always been wary of the notion of 'being in love'. It had always struck me as superficial, as too Mills-&-Boon. And so, I did not want to believe that it was happening to me, this fiction I read only in books.

* * *

BoyBoy came to open the gate. He took my hand in both his and exclaimed, 'Nomsa!' in that exuberant manner of his that defied his age.

I smiled; it always touched me seeing BoyBoy, he was old now, rheumy eyed and stooped, with tufts of white hair dotting an otherwise

bald head. How lucky Mama was to have such a faithful gardener. He had stayed throughout the years despite the suspicion with which she treated all her domestic workers. According to Mama, something was always missing; the rice went too fast, the milk never lasted, someone was stealing from her. The house girls had come and gone, but BoyBoy had stayed. He tended to the vegetables and the hedge and resuscitated, with uncanny patience and care, Mama's rose garden each time Bingo flattened it. It was BoyBoy who had built the tree house at the bottom of the garden.

I shook his hand, asked him how he was, and got the same answer I always got.

'It is lonely place, now that you go.'

I found Mama in the parlour, folded on one of the black leather couches, watching *Days of Our Lives* on satellite TV.

'Mama,' I said in greeting, bending down to hug her. She hugged me back limply.

'Mtanami,' she replied.

The scent of her perfume was so cloying it almost knocked me out. She was dressed in lilac pants and a matching blouse, as though she was expecting to go somewhere, the perm on her head carefully combed. It was always uncomfortable for me, visiting Mama these days. Perhaps it was because of the way she looked so lost, ever since Dad left for London. During my last visit, she told me about the posting she had found for me in Doctor Mukoshe's medical practice in Green Ealing. I had told her gently that I didn't want to go back to England, that there was an advert I had seen in the paper, for a job I was interested in.

'Nonsense!' she exclaimed and dismissed the matter with an autocratic flick of her wrist, as though England were my only option and any reasonable person could see that. 'You will be staying with your father.' No longer affectionately referred to as 'My Dumi', but *your father*. 'Doctor Mukoshe is doing very well you know, he's managed to go *mainstream*.'

She hadn't asked what job was advertised. It was as though what I wanted didn't matter, as though my wishes didn't count. I tried to speak about it, tried to explain that it was a really good medical posting in Gulu.

'Gulu, isn't that one of those war-torn places, somewhere in the Congo?'

‘Uganda.’

‘That’s right, Uganda. Who wants to work in Uganda? Have you ever heard anyone saying they’re going to Uganda?’

I sighed. It was always about everyone else, whose daughter had gone where, whose son was making a lot of money in England. I had thought the fact that it was a UN posting would have excited Mama, given her something else to look forward to other than going on and on to her friends about her daughter the *doctor*.

I didn’t argue with her. I was tired, of always trying to measure up, never making the grade, being both the daughter, and the son that never materialised. I knew the real reason she wanted me in England was so I could spy on Dad for her, just like she had expected me to when I was in university there. I didn’t tell her how it was difficult for me, I really didn’t want to get entangled in the whole thing. At the same time I didn’t want to lie to Mama when she phoned and asked if Dad was seeing other women.

‘Is he screwing around?’

That day I must’ve gripped the receiver too hard because my palm was sore afterwards. I had never thought that Mama could speak so crudely, caught up in her Women of the Faith series and her Sisters of the Evangelism group and her church luncheons. I didn’t tell her Dad was seeing a Ghanaian about my age, a waitress with polished black skin and in-your-face extensions the colour of the sunrise, all reds and oranges. I didn’t want to cover up for Dad either, so each time she brought up the subject I mumbled something about being in a rush and hung up before she could press for details.

‘I hope she’s white,’ she said one day, as though she could bear it more that way. I was reminded of the song by Radio Hive that went ‘if you cheat darlin’, please cheat nicely’, as though there could ever be a *nice* angle to the whole thing.

She laughed then, a bitter laugh that sounded as if she was choking. Then she cleared her throat and after an uncomfortable silence she thanked me for the lace I had sent her, it would make good curtains.

‘Next time make sure you get top quality lace, especially as it’s your father’s money paying for it. Better to spend on good lace than on one of his whores.’

She was very bitter that day, Mama. As I hung up I wondered if she really was clearing her throat or crying.

'How are things Mama?' I asked her now.

'How else could they be? No food in the shops, prices going up all the time, long queues at the bank and no money still ... The fridge isn't working anymore because of these sudden power cuts, now all the meat is going bad. And this new girl I have wants to be paid in rands, she won't touch Zim dollars, she says. Where am I supposed to get rands from? Ah! But by the grace of God we will survive.'

'Amen,' I said mechanically.

There was an uncomfortable silence. It seemed there was nothing to say. We had never really talked, Mama and I, never really connected. I was about to say something about Ikeji when she tinkled the little bell resting on the coffee table next to her, and Friday came running, curtsying when she arrived.

'Mango juice,' Mama purred.

Friday bent her knee again as she disappeared. I remembered her from my last visit, as one of the house girls who was determined to brave Mama's wrath. The last time I came I found her in the foyer, dipping her fingers in a tin of water and spraying the Mona Lisa print hanging on the wall with tiny droplets. 'What are you doing?' I had asked her.

The girl thrust a timid finger at the portrait. 'Amadlozi, evil spirits, Ma. Woman in photo, her eyes follow me wherever I go.'

I explained to her that it was just the way 'woman in photo' had been painted. She nodded but continued to mutter incoherently each time she passed through the foyer.

'Mrs Ngezi's daughter is getting married,' Mama said. 'To a Shona, can you imagine! I wonder what you Ndebele girls of today see in these Shona boys. You know if you ever do that to me I will have a heart attack, I'm telling you.'

'I've met someone,' I began awkwardly. I didn't want to have to listen to any more of Mama's tribal banter, listen to her make everything in my life somehow about *her*. It was as though she lived through me these days, Mama, now that things had fallen apart with Dad.

'I've met someone,' I repeated. Wanted to make it known before she began telling me about one of her friends' sons, urging me to make a phone call. She had put an ad in a magazine on my behalf once, in one of those dating sections, and that was when I stopped visiting. I wasn't desperate, didn't want to be lumped with one of her self-absorbed suitors who made it a point to comment on my age, insinuating that at thirty

I was getting stale for marriage, before announcing his readiness for a wedding, as though he was doing me a favour.

Mama and I had never been able to talk much, least of all about men. She had made one brief awkward speech on my twenty-first birthday: 'If you start sleeping around, I will disown you!' And that was that.

'Who is he?' she said, leaning forward.

I could feel my palms sweating. 'His name is Ikeji.'

The cold air generated by the fans made me shiver.

'What is that?' A frown was creasing her brow now, Mama spat: 'Are you ... Are you *pregnant*?'

'No, no Mama, I just ... I just ...'

It irritated me, the way I felt so childlike in Mama's presence.

I stood up abruptly. 'I have to get back to work.'

Mama too stood up. 'But wait – the drinks –'

'It's okay Mama, next time.' I was already heading for the door.

'Wait! You never visit these days. When will I see you?'

'I'll come.'

'When?'

I paused. 'Soon.'

It was a lie and I knew she knew it. She took my hand.

'Come, sit. Tell me about this ... Ikeji.'

I hesitated. 'Ikeji.'

'All right. Is he Nigerian?'

'Yes Mama. Now I have to go, really. I'm on the afternoon shift.'

'Well, I suppose Nigerians aren't all that bad. Tell me about him.'

I smiled. Wasn't she the one who had told me to beware of these foreigners? Especially the Chinese because she didn't want her grandchildren to look like they had 'slits for eyes'! And these uncouth Nigerians who 'changed women like they were changing underwear'!

'I'll bring him to meet you Mama, soon.'

'You must have the most expensive wedding.'

'Mama!'

'I only want what's best for my daughter, you know. And these Nigerians are rich.'

She looked so old now, so despondent, all dressed up and going nowhere. I felt sorry for her. She had to be lonely, sitting in this parlour

all day, with these stuffed sofas for company. Impulsively, I hugged her. I kissed her cheek, promised to visit again soon.

* * *

He told me about his wife on one of those windless days when the sky is depressed and sulking at you through the window. I was sitting on his bed, my foot on the white sheet with blue flowers. I laughed, funny but I did. I didn't want to cry in front of him. If I had he probably would have said something like, 'You're too white.'

Rage. That's what he would have expected. Rage. To see me flying across the room and pounding his chest and begging like he was some prize to be vanquished. I didn't move.

Instead I picked up the book he had given me, turned it over, said, '*Beasts of No Nation* by Uzodinma Iweala, the title really rings of West Africa, we really do have talent. I wanted to make sure you don't have the book I chose for you before I buy it, *Butterfly Burning* by Yvonne Vera.'

He stared at me. So I carried on, asked when he would teach me how to make roasted cassava flakes and ofensala soup. Told him I had actually gotten around to cooking, tried his mother's spices, and it was simply delicious, the way they soaked into everything and gave my flat such a homely feel.

'I told my Mama about you,' I said.

A bee buzzed through the window, sniffed the plastic flowers on the centre table before settling on a pudding stain plastered on the wall.

'My wife was cursed,' Ikeji spoke finally. 'Her womb was tied. Before I left we went to this dibia and it looks like the medicine he gave her worked, and now, she is pregnant.'

The happiness finally shattered, in all its fragility, and I was suddenly nauseated by all of it, this Nigeria and this talk of witchcraft and this bombshell of his wife ticking between us. I wanted to shout at him. And then my throat was on fire and I was fighting the tears. We had never defined our relationship, me and him, it was something he liked to say had *happened* to us, and so we were waiting, to see where it would take us.

I thought, then, how this was all too clichéd, this talk of a wife I never knew about, this break up. Too *everyday*. We were not everyday, Ikeji and I.

I wanted to ask if he was going to leave his wife and then suddenly it was such a stupid thing to even try to ask. So I pouted at him, trying not to look so fragile, so hurt.

I walked out to the energetic rhythms of Fela, with what I hoped was my best look of dignity.

* * *

He never called. I never called. I wondered what we would say to each other if he ever did call, if I would be able to say anything of value to him.

* * *

I was in England about a year later, at a UN convention on the plight of children in the rebel war waged by the LRA in Northern Uganda, when I saw the book. I was at McAbbey's, clutching the latest John Grisham and perusing the Africa section, when I saw it. *The Colour of a Rose*, debut novel by Nigerian author Ikeji Okochi. Meet the author at Granford Hall for autograph and questions. I knew I would not go to the launch. I would simply buy the book. I picked it up, felt its weight, and ran my fingers across the blazing cover.

The second page read:

*Onwu egbuchughi ji e jiri chu aja, e mesie o pue om e –
If the yam used in sacrifice does not die, it will eventually
germinate – Igbo Proverb.*

I didn't want to be so presumptuous as to think he was referring to us.

Portrait of a Woman in Bed

Bronwyn McLennan

The colours are all wrong. He puts down his paintbrush and steps back from the easel, studies the canvas, then her. Perhaps it is the light. In the late-winter afternoon, the room with its heavy furnishings is dark and gloomy, like an unrestored Dutch still-life.

Sighing, he takes a cigarette from a box on the table next to him. 'Smoke?' he asks.

She shakes her head.

'It's getting late. I think I'm done for today.' He walks over to the window and looks outside, across the lawn to the main house. The lights are on, and, behind the French doors, he can see his aunt sitting at the kitchen table, a bottle of wine in front of her.

'Can I give you a lift to the station?' He turns to the woman on the bed.

'Yes, thanks.' She rolls up, off her side, rotates her neck and flexes one leg at a time, then wraps the silk shawl she'd been lying on around her shoulders.

He takes another drag of his cigarette and watches her as she walks across the room to where her clothes are draped across a wooden armchair, and begins to dress. She looks so different in her jeans and Polar-fleece jersey, its baggy shape concealing the curves of her waist and hips. He turns away from her and stubs out his cigarette. 'I'll fetch the car.'

As he walks up the driveway, he reflects on how little has changed since his last visit here, so many years ago. The only difference is that this time he is alone, and, instead of staying in one of the guest rooms, his aunt has put him in the old servants' quarters, now a storage room for unused furniture, but spacious enough to use as a studio.

It is a strain to lift the garage door, its automatic mechanism long broken. Inside are two cars: a Renault, and a ship-like 1980s Mercedes to which his aunt has given him the keys. It smells of old leather, petrol and damp carpet. He rolls down the window to let in some fresh air while he waits for the engine to warm up. It takes a while. By the time he has the car started, she is waiting at the bottom of the driveway. Overgrown branches scrape against the sides of the car as he reverses. He gets out to open the gate. A bright red and white FOR SALE sign bearing the name and smiling portrait of an agent is tied to the gatepost.

On the way to the station it begins to rain. He turns on the windscreen wipers and slows down. She is quiet, watching the rows of vines go past. 'Is this where I turn to get to the main road?' he asks her.

She nods.

A confusion of pedestrians, minibus taxis and vendors obstruct the road in front of the station building. He comes to a halt as near as possible to the entrance and leaves the car idling. Two taxis immediately hoot behind him.

'So I'll see you on Thursday, then?'

'Yes,' he says. 'What time? I can pick you up from college if you want.'

'Okay, thanks. Say around twelve.' She opens her door. 'I'll wait in the parking lot. You remember how to get there?'

'I'll find it,' he says.

He watches her as she runs towards the station, tries to follow her green umbrella for a few moments, but she is soon lost in the crowd.

The streetlamps are on as he drives back. It's raining hard now. By the time he has opened and closed the gates to the house and the garage door, he is soaked. His aunt is still sitting in the kitchen at the wooden table, warming herself in front of a gas heater, and surrounded by half-packed boxes.

She pushes the bottle of red wine across the table towards him.

'Hello, Arne,' she says, looking up from a stack of letters and bills. 'Grab a glass. You're wet,' she adds.

'Thanks, Viv.' He fills a mug, which is all he can find, and begins to take off his shoes and jacket.

'So how was the session?' she asks him.

He pulls out a chair piled high with recipe books, napkins and sets of coasters. Some of them fall to the floor.

'Just put those on the counter.' Viv leans across to help him.

He sits down, hangs his jacket over the chair and places his shoes in front of the heater.

'It was fine. I'm just a bit out of practice.' He pauses before adding, 'I think maybe I need to leave it for a few days.'

'Yes, well. Some distance can give perspective, I suppose.' She shrugs, puts aside the letter she'd been reading and pours the last of the wine into her glass. 'By the way, there was a call for you.' She waits for a response but he says nothing. 'I took a message. It's next to the phone.'

'Thanks.' He picks up a newspaper from one of the piles on the table and reads the front-page headline.

They sit, listening to the soft hiss of the heater, the rain outside.

'You should really see Henry while you're in Cape Town,' she says, after a while.

He feels a flash of guilt at the mention of his uncle. 'I know, you're right. Maybe tomorrow. I'll phone him.'

She nods. 'I'm sure he'd like to see you.'

He looks down at the paper again, continues reading the front-page article. Beneath the table his shoes are starting to steam.

'I'm going to take a bath.' Viv stretches, getting up from her seat. 'The geyser should be warm enough by now.'

He watches her climb the stairs, noting how thin she has become, how grey her hair. She pauses briefly on the last step, perhaps to steady herself or to take a breath. It is a while before he hears the geyser cranking up and the water begin to run.

That night he lies in the bed, still unmade from that afternoon. He has hauled off the oppressive bedspread and attempted to puff up the pillows, which are now more dust than down. He shifts uncomfortably, longing for uncomplicated cotton sheets and smooth, sinus-friendly pillows. He reaches for the shawl lying on the bedside table where she'd left it and breathes into it, inhaling the smell of her body. As he drifts off, he imagines her lying next to him, her hot dark skin connecting with his, along his back, behind his knees, her damp breath forming words he can't understand against his ear. But then, as he sinks further into sleep, he finds he is in a different bed, and the presence next to him, now pale and distant, has withdrawn her heat. The gentle breath is replaced by crying: quick sucks of breath progressing to raw gasps. He awakes to

finds himself on the far side of the mattress, one arm hanging off the edge, cold in the night air.

From his pillows he can just make out the top of an oak tree through the window. A blue security light from the driveway shines through the window, illuminating the easel in the corner of the room. He studies his painting. The bed is nearly complete: rosewood base blackened with age, twist-turned posts ending in a bare railing from which curtains used to hang, a dull green brocade bedspread. Behind it, barely discernable in the gloom, are the shadowed forms of a heavy wardrobe, a large black trunk and a long-case clock. His eyes shift to the foreground. He's not sure if he's adequately captured the varnished lustre of her skin, and her expression seems altered. He turns away from her gaze and faces the wall, pulls the shawl closer to him and tries to fall sleep.

The next day he phones his uncle Henry and they arrange to have lunch in town. They meet in St George's Mall.

'It's good to see you, Arne.' Henry pats him on the shoulder.

His uncle has aged in the last decade: there are lines across his forehead and alongside the corners of his mouth.

They walk through Green Market Square, past stalls selling the sort of curios he'd seen everywhere since he'd arrived: at the airport, the station, along the roadsides. There are West African silk-screens of ochre sunsets and elongated silhouettes, woven bags, seed necklaces, leather goods and carved figurines.

They pass the Old Townhouse with its dark, seventeenth-century portraits and landscapes and come to another cobbled street lined with antique dealers, restaurants and art galleries. The weather has cleared, and there are a few tables outside, where people are taking advantage of the respite from the rain. At the adjacent restaurant, a group of buskers are playing djembas, and further down the street a blind man strums a guitar held upright in his lap. They sit down at the last empty table.

Henry lights a cigarette and offers one to Arne.

'How is Viv?' Henry asks, handing over his lighter.

'She seems fine. Busy with the packing.'

'Good, that's good ... I'm glad you're able to give her a hand.'

'Yes, it's good timing.'

The waiter arrives with menus and they order drinks. Looking up briefly, Arne catches Henry watching him, a frown on his face, whether of concern or disapproval, he can't be sure. Conversation turns

to Henry's job as an architect, and a housing complex he is designing. Then, as expected, Henry asks: 'Have you thought about what you're going to do while you're here, work-wise?' He hesitates. 'I'm sure I could find something for you ...'

'Thank you, Henry. But, you know, I'm just seeing how things go for now.'

He doesn't miss the flicker of relief.

'Of course. Well, you let me know.' He lights another cigarette.

The food arrives and they both turn to listen to the buskers, who have now moved to their restaurant. At the end of the lunch they leave separately, Arne to look at some galleries, Henry to his office.

He doesn't look at the painting again until Thursday. She assumes her pose, adjusting the cushions against the headboard behind her, laying down the shawl as before.

As he paints, they talk. He feels more comfortable today, his mood lightened by the winter sun, and she too seems more relaxed.

She asks him about his hometown, Utrecht, a university town in the Netherlands. He tells her about the canals, the houseboats decorated with boxes of geraniums and clothes lines, the cobbled streets in the old city, the Dom Kerk and the Oudegracht with its bars and restaurants.

'It sounds lovely.'

'Yes, it's very picaresque. Clean ...'

'And do you live in a houseboat?'

He laughs. 'No, an apartment.'

He tells her about the housing block where he lives just outside the city centre, in a semi-industrial area, with its view over suburbs, canals and factories. 'It's nice, but small. I miss having a garden, space.' He talks about his dream of designing a house in the country: modern, with terrazzo walls, steel, lots of glass and light.

'A glass palace?'

He doesn't answer, looks down at the painting. She shifts and the shawl slips to the floor. He walks across the room to pick it up. He's not been this close to her before. As he leans against the bed to reach the shawl he feels the slight humidity of the sheet, from her body, and, briefly, as he adjusts the details of the folds against her, his hand glances her thigh. He withdraws abruptly and returns to the easel. Their earlier ease has gone and he finds himself searching for things to say, chatting

inately about his plans to go up Table Mountain. Later he drives her to the station again, and arranges to fetch her there on Tuesday.

Tuesday comes, but she is not waiting at the station. He calls her, but her cell goes straight to voicemail. Perhaps she thought he'd meant to fetch her at college, he thinks. He waits a while, then decides to drive there. At reception he is directed to the third-year jewellery workshop. It is hot and dirty inside, the floor strewn with bits of metal debris. The buzz of fluorescent lights is broken intermittently by sounds of scraping and hammering and there is a heady smell of chemicals and gas. A few people are sitting behind work benches. He approaches a student filing a piece of metal and asks him if he has seen her. He shakes his head.

'You're looking for Mandisa?' a short girl says from behind him. She is dressed in a thick leather apron, a pair of green goggles on top of her head. 'She hasn't been in college since last week. I've been trying to get hold of her but she's not answering her phone.'

He tries phoning her several times during the week, leaves messages, but she does not return his calls. Over the next few days he keeps himself busy by helping his aunt pack, and attempts to work on the painting.

Although satisfied that he's managed to capture something of the contrast between background and subject he'd had in mind, her body is still too angular, the proportions not quite right. He broadens her hip and fleshes out the thighs, but after several revisions admits that he needs to see her again in order to finish it.

The drive to the township where she lives takes over an hour. He manages to find the sports centre, parks, and gets out. From here he must walk. He looks at the paper with the student's directions. He can see the first landmark, the clinic, from across the road. He starts to walk, soon taking off his jersey and tying it around his waist. It is overcast but warm for this time of the year.

He makes his way along the road, past a barber shop selling haircuts and gold teeth, a bakkie filled with sheep for R550 each, a bustling taxi rank, fruit sellers. The smell of braaing fills the air as vendors cook meat over halved oil drums with steel griddle tops along the roadside.

At the clinic he turns right, as instructed, and finds himself in a narrow dirt track, barely a road, flanked by endless rows of shacks extending far into the distance and winding and branching off in all directions, with no apparent pattern. Above him hangs a network of

wires, like a giant web, strung from electricity poles and anchored to the shacks. There are people everywhere. Men drinking quarts spill out of shebeens onto the roadside, radios blast and a group of children play soccer on a sandy pitch. There is very little green, no trees, not much that is natural; it is nothing like what he'd imagined from the books he'd read.

As he walks, the path becomes increasingly narrow, more densely packed, bewildering. The paraffin fumes are giving him a headache and the smoke and dust from the sandy, ungravelled road burn the lining of his nostrils. He sees a dog ahead, lying across the path; it doesn't move as he nears, and he steps over it. At last he spots a red Cell C container, and just before it a shack with a door painted bright green, as the student had described. The door is closed. He knocks. There is no answer.

He notices that the latch is pulled back. Pushing gently against the door, he finds that it opens. There is no one inside. His eyes adjust to the dim light. It is a single room with a bed on one side and a table on the other. A few plastic crates are stored beneath the table, and on top of it is a gas cooker. He is surprised by the femininity of the room: the pale pink carpet and floral bedspread with continental cushions, the embroidered net curtains, the rose-patterned rug. He stands in the centre of the floor for a while, not knowing what to do now that he is here. He sits down on the bed – there are no chairs – and suddenly realises how tired he is. The bed is springy and squeaky, and his legs leave the floor as he sinks into it. He sits a while, but before long he succumbs to his fatigue. His eyes close and he falls asleep.

Later, he awakes to find himself curled up in a hollow in the centre of the bed. At first he feels confused, then, when he looks at his watch, concerned. Five o'clock. It is almost dark in the room. He leaves quickly, walking briskly back along the paths. The clouds look more serious now, and it is cold. The music from the shebeens is louder and heavier, and the quarts drinkers have moved inside. He passes the same dog lying in the pathway; it hasn't moved.

He reaches the sports centre and climbs into the car, relieved to be locked inside, and drives back towards the city; the sky is now completely covered in grey-black cloud, Table Mountain obscured.

He struggles to fall asleep that night, kept awake by the wind and the rain and a confused mix of images and thoughts – of the township, Mandisa's room, Henry, the blind guitar player in Church Street, the

despair on his aunt's face the afternoon he'd watched her through the kitchen window. Then, for the first time since he'd left, he allows himself to think of that last night in Utrecht.

Their normally immaculate, white bedroom had been littered with tissues making a trail that began near his feet and ended at Marijke, ensconced in the bed, blonde hair greasy, eyes red from crying. He recalls their argument, the same one they'd had so many times before.

'Please, Arne, can't we talk about this? Maybe you can go somewhere closer. And I could take off a few weeks from work, to come with you?'

'You just don't get it, do you? We've been through all this before. You can go pick olives in Tuscany, if you want. But that's not what I need.'

'Oh for God's sake, Arne, you're being ridiculous! What do you think, that you're some kind of Gauguin?' Her bitter laughter turned to harsh crying as he took out his suitcase and began throwing in clothes.

That had been their last argument; he'd left the next morning.

It takes him a long time to fall asleep and the next day he wakes up tired and drained. It is early, and still dark. He feels claustrophobic in the room, and the unfinished painting goads him; he needs to get out. He lets himself quietly into the main house and takes some leftover food and beers from the fridge, which he puts into a backpack. It's just beginning to grow light as he leaves in the car, and there's a strong wind. He has no particular destination in mind, but sets off in the direction of Noordhoek. He finds a parking spot, pays the car guard and crosses the dunes to the beach, taking off his shoes and stuffing them into his backpack. The sand is cool and firm from the night's rain. There is no one on the beach – it is too cold and windy for dog-walking or picnics – and only a few die-hard surfers in the water.

After a while he begins to feel hot and sweaty and, despite the weather, has the urge to swim. He strips off his jeans and shirt and leaves them next to his backpack.

The cold water explodes against his head and he feels his skull tighten from the shock. He starts swimming, further and further out, and it's some time before he realises how far he is from the shore. He scans the water for surfers, but they have all left. He is alone.

As he starts to swim back, the strong current keeps pulling him out to sea, and he does not seem to be getting much closer to the shore. His

muscles begin to cramp from cold and fatigue, and he turns on his back in an effort to stay afloat. He tries to swim again, and seems to make some progress, but as wave after wave pulls him down, he begins to run out of breath from holding it each time he submerges.

Another large wave breaks over him, and he struggles not to go under; for a terrifying moment he is buffeted out of control. Choking and gasping for breath he tries to turn onto his back again. Then, just when he is close to giving in a large swell lifts him up. For a few seconds he is sure this is the one that will suck him under permanently, dash him against the sea bed, but at the last moment it seems to change its mind, and spits him out on the shore.

He lies there for a moment, exhausted, coughing up water and trying to regain his breath.

A figure approaches, an old man, bearded and dressed in multiple layers. As he tries to get onto his feet the man extends a hand, but he brushes it aside. Again he attempts to stand, stumbling on new-fawn legs. With all his energy, he wrenches himself up, pushes past the man as he stumbles forward, grabs his clothes and begins to run, slowly, limbs still weak, chest burning, salt and sand stinging his eyes. Only once he is in the car, pulling on his jeans, does he realise that he does not have his backpack. He has to drive barefoot, feet burning from the cold and hands shaking on the steering wheel.

He turns into the driveway, relieved to have made it back. It has just begun to rain again. As he parks, Viv calls from the kitchen.

‘There you are. I’m just going out.’ It is the first time he has seen her wearing make-up, her long hair loose and brushed, a silver chain around her neck. ‘I was getting worried about you,’ she says. ‘Have you been swimming?’ she asks incredulously, looking at his wet hair and bare feet.

‘Yes.’ He’s not sure whether to offer an explanation.

‘I see.’

He knows she would like to say more.

‘I won’t be late. But if you’re hungry there’s food in the fridge.’

‘Thanks, Viv.’ The gas heater is off, and he rubs his arms to keep warm.

‘By the way, there was another phone call for you. Marijke again. I think you’d better call her, Arne.’

‘I know.’ He walks over and kisses her cheek.

After a long bath he goes back up to the main house, reluctant to be in his room with the painting. He makes himself a cup of tea and takes it upstairs to the sitting room. It's raining again, harder now. Does it ever stop? he wonders. The once overflowing bookshelves are empty: their contents packed away in boxes. For a moment his mind flicks to his and Marijke's first day in their new apartment, Marijke making a joke about moving out of one box and into another. He turns on the TV, and flips through the channels, considers making a fire. There is nothing worth watching, so he switches it off. As he does so, he hears a distant tapping sound. He goes to the window and looks out.

Across the lawn, a woman is standing outside his room, knocking at the door. He stays where he is and watches as she turns and walks towards the main house. It is Mandisa. The bottom half of her jeans are soaked, her umbrella scant defence against the Cape wind. She finds the doorbell, rings it, and waits, then rings again a few more times.

He stays where he is, eyes fixed on her.

The ringing continues for some time, and still he remains standing at the window, waiting, until, finally, she leaves.

Mary, Mary

Rose Richards

You say you're a reporter? The Burtons didn't send you, did they? Who? Oh, the Burtons, my neighbours on the right. Come in then, but don't let them see you. They're always poking their noses into other people's business and if they hear I've had a reporter here, they'll think something's going on. What? No, of course it's not. I'm just trying to live in my house and get on with my life without being a nuisance to anyone. Why would anything be going on? How did you find out about me anyway? I mean, how did you decide to come and see me, instead of seeing someone else? Well, I'd like to know who your sources are.

Mind the path. We've had rain for almost a week and the ground's a bit unstable. Yes, I know the beds are a mess, but look at the mountains! They're as clear as cardboard cut-outs and the March sky is enamel blue, full of resting thunder. I used to love this weather. Wet earth after the rain and dried leaves – crisp without the under-pull of loam that fills your lungs. Makes you feel part of nature, as if you're part of something bigger. Things change. I don't spend as much time in the garden anymore. You're very judgmental to criticise my flower beds. In my experience gardens take care of themselves.

Once I thought as you do. I decided to look after my garden. Fill my empty beds. The nursery seedlings I bought did not thrive, but shrivelled or were eaten by garden things I never identified. So I began to grow slips from the original plants of the garden and started my own nursery on the kitchen windowsill, where the sunlight could refract through the jam jars and spice bottles. I can see you have really come about my beds. You can't fool me. I'm getting to that. I certainly hope you are not from the municipality.

There were, at times, about twenty slip bottles on the sill – red geranium, English lavender, broken off stumps of daisy bushes – with

water in them ranging in colour from mineral-water clear to over-brewed tea. I suppose that would explain how I lost track of things. One day I moved an old oregano bottle aside to find a largish jam jar crowded amongst other jars where it didn't receive much light. The water was murky, the plant inside a vague white blob topped with a tuft of dark green. It seemed like a bulb of some sort, but I didn't recognise the leaves.

The bulb itself was comma-shaped, with a heavy head from which the green tuft grew just above the surface of the water. In the centre of the head was a black mark, like an eye. The stroke of the comma curled beneath the head into a point and in the curve I could dimly make out three or four crinkly white rootlets.

Its water needs changing, I thought.

I ran in some tepid water from the kitchen mixer. At last, when the water seemed clearer, I raised the jar carefully to wipe it before putting it back on the sill. Then I saw it. One of the rootlets moved independently. I looked closer. The rootlet ended in five little stubs and inside the bulb, I could discern a gill-like flickering.

When I first showed it to Sarah, my charlady, she was amused and said the bulb looked like a fish. But a fortnight later, the bulb had developed facial features and a distinct neck. Now in a largish instant coffee bottle, it had rapidly outgrown the jam jar, it grew quickly and soon required an even bigger bottle. Sarah started saying the bulb should be thrown away, that it was a bad omen to keep in the house a plant that looked so much like a person. It definitely had eyes by then, though they remained firmly shut.

I found a medium-sized fish tank at the Methodist church's car boot sale, and bought some toys from the supermarket to put inside. The bulb did not respond to the rattle, even when I stroked its root-like hand with it, but it did seem to like the water wheel that had come with the fish tank. The water wheel moved with help from the tank's filter. I got the impression from the semblance of a smile that played about its pale lips that the bubbles tickled the bulb agreeably.

But, nonetheless, I felt a twinge of misgiving. I think Sarah's dislike of the bulb had something to do with it. I valued Sarah's views. She helped me a great deal when I first came to this town. She helped me cook, when I could not bear to feed myself. She helped me unpack, when I could not face another box. And in return, she told me her troubles. I

have sent her five children toys and, in winter, I have bought them shoes. At any rate, I bought them all shoes the first winter, which was, as you can imagine, rather expensive, and after that, I bought shoes for Katrien, the eldest, reasoning that her old shoes could be passed down to Liesbet and so on. I have given Sarah small gifts of money when her husband drank away her month's earnings. I wished she might have shown a bit more enthusiasm about my new plant.

I hoped that she would come to appreciate it more once the plant was bigger, perhaps if it produced flowers. I suggested Sarah take a few weeks' holiday. She agreed, saying she wanted to visit her aging mother over the mountain, and while she was away, I continued to look after the plant and watch it grow.

Once in its new tank, with its own air supply and an experimental combination of nutrients that included Epsom salts, nitrates, vitamin B drops for tropical fish and a crumbled tablet of slow-release multivitamin for growing children, the bulb grew with remarkable speed. Its legs and arms unfurled like tendrils and its body thickened and solidified until the shadows of its internal organs were quite hidden. Within a month, it was the size of a newborn human baby; within another couple of weeks its limbs were pressed uncomfortably against its tank's walls. But its skin retained the faint greenish cast that I had at first attributed to the algae build-up in the water.

The bulb baby could not remain in the fish tank forever. In fact its size alone showed that it was almost ready to come out of the tank permanently. This was a problem. What to do? I felt a growing reluctance to get too closely involved. I stopped studying it so closely and left it to its own devices for a while. Perhaps it was ready for planting and I could get it into the garden and out of sight before Sarah came back. She'd phoned to say she wanted to get back to work. I could not put her off any longer.

I decided it was time to take a closer look at the plant again. So I reached into the tank and pulled out the bulb baby by its dark green tuft that had remained remarkably thick and luxuriant through out its gestation. The vegetable child, who clearly was a girl after all, though I couldn't bring myself to call the creature anything but 'it', opened its mouth widely and yawned, but kept its eyes tight shut. I almost dropped it on the living room rug.

Somehow I managed to keep a grip on its tuft, realising that the thing could move by itself and might move off somewhere if it got away. I could not bring myself to touch the creature anywhere other than its hair, so it dangled fatly from my hands, seemingly unconcerned by such attention. Its skin looked slimy and froglike where it wasn't peeling and its hair smelt of freshly cut grass above the marshy undertones of the tank water. For the first time, my fascination was eclipsed by a very distinct feeling that the sooner the thing, which looked less than a bulb and more like a baby, was out of my house, the better. The novelty had worn off. I also realised that it was too big for me to manage alone. I would have to wait for Sarah after all.

One dark evening not long after Sarah's return, I carried the plant baby, swaddled in an old bath towel, out of my house. I bundled it in the crook of my left arm and, under my right, I clutched two shovels. I was paying Sarah overtime. I only hoped she wouldn't ask why we were planting things at night. Then I'd have to make up stories about not having time during the day or the sun being too harsh for my skin.

I was glad that the thing was wrapped up so that I couldn't touch its integument. It felt cold even through the towel, which was damp as caul and had a faded pattern of grey and purple flowers on it. The bulb baby's eyes were still screwed shut and it seemed not to be breathing. All its lumpy features were scrunched up knots and protrusions in the middle of its yeasty face. I flipped the corner of the towel over it before Sarah could see too much.

'I must just check that the Burtons aren't in – I thought I heard them go out after lunch,' I explained, peering over the wall at their dark house. Their car was not under the carport and their lights were off.

Unlike the previous owner of my house, I am not a truly committed gardener, but that does not mean I don't care about my garden. In fact I had several ideas about changes I wanted to make in it. But holding the bundle before me in the gloom, I feared they would all come to naught. I had at that point been attempting to comply with municipal demands to create an indigenous, water-wise garden and, in fact, would have liked to go one step further by having a self-sustaining ecosystem. I had been delayed in achieving this because I still required some advice about eradicating foreign invaders. I had the distinct suspicion that planting a bulb baby in my garden was not going to do the trick. I had no idea where she'd come from, but it clearly wasn't Southern Africa. She had

a distinctly foreign air about her that went beyond her pale, porridgey skin.

Sarah had propped the two shovels against the syringa's trunk in the long Kikuyu grass by the compost heap. I took one, glad the long, light summer evenings were over and nursing a faint hope that somehow the ghastly infant was dead. It certainly would be after winter was finished. I know what you're thinking: burying an apparently living child in the cold earth is not a good thing to do and me a woman and all, but put yourself in my place for a moment. What else could I do?

Fortunately, the previous week had been rainy, so the ground was not as tough as it could have been. For a while, nothing was heard but the 'chunk, chunk' of our shovel blades biting the earth and the muffled flopping and sifting of the soil falling onto the growing pile beside the hole. When the hole was almost thigh deep, we stopped.

'Time to put it in,' I said, wiping my forehead with an earthy hand.

We looked over to the pale glimmer that was the towel in the moonlight, to see that it looked strangely flat. At first I assumed that the moonlight had distorted my sense of depth, but I was forced to realise on closer inspection that the towel was indeed empty – strewn, in fact – and that its vegetal occupant had departed. I dropped my shovel and cast about for the baby.

'It can't have got far,' I said, 'it's only just learned to crawl.'

'It moves?' Sarah demanded.

We stumbled over molehills in the dark, prodding at pale lumps in the moonlight. They were mainly rocks or building detritus from my new wall. The baby had got as far as the front door steps and had curled up there and gone to sleep. It did not awake as we inserted it into its new bed and covered it with soil until nothing but its grassy tuft remained above the surface. I gave the soil a couple of thwacks to make sure it was tightly packed.

I decided right then and there, standing in the gloom, not to water the bulb at all during winter – rather let the seasons take their course and when spring came, to feed it a bit of growth stimulant to soothe my conscience. Nothing else. If it survived it should get everything it needed from the soil, unless that had become too impoverished as the municipality claimed. I was mulling over whether or not the growth stimulant would be a good idea, when I discovered Sarah had left

without saying goodbye. I thought it rather rude, especially considering how much I had paid her. The little mound of earth was still (as far as I could see in the dark) and the night was quiet, other than the distant hum of a car engine on the coastal road. I stood under the trees for a few minutes, listening, before returning inside to my bed and a book.

The bulb remained buried all winter. Occasionally I'd toss a little extra compost onto its tuft, until it was completely covered. I found myself walking absently over it. I am not the best gardener in the world. So I reasoned it was unlikely that the bulb would actually bloom.

I did not see much of Sarah after the burying. I felt, to be honest, a little put out. I left her to her own devices and she left me to mine. Nowadays she always had some church event on when she was supposed to come and do my house. I met her in the main street one day in early spring and she mentioned something to me about a new sideline she had for making money, something that involved crocheting things for church bazaars. I admit I didn't really want to spend time talking about toilet seat covers and tablecloths, so I made excuses and hurried off to the shops. A week later, Sarah left a message on my answering machine saying she would not be coming back at all and thanking me for my help over the years. After this I had to accept that I was, in some senses anyway, on my own. I had considered Sarah a friend, although an employee, but now I saw that those days were over.

I did not have time to feel melancholy. My gardener uncovered the bulb while digging vigorously in the periwinkle bed at the back. How the thing got there I'll never know. He was clearing space for an icecream bush when he dug into its left shoulder and lodged the spade in what I suppose was its equivalent of a clavicle. It was immediately apparent that the bulb was now to all appearances a six-year-old child. That would have taken some talking to get around, even though it did not appear to suffer many ill effects from the spade chop and had not bled at all when cut. Fortunately, it had merely rolled over in the bed and began burrowing under the soil and leaves while I was dealing with the gardener. Neither of us referred to it again and it was shortly after this that he stopped coming too. I find uneducated people unfathomable sometimes, don't you?

When I saw the bulb child again, a couple of weeks later, a slashed cicatrice was clearly visible on its fungous shoulder. I had come upon it one evening, while I was absentmindedly pruning the roses. It was

caught in the bougainvillea claws by its tufty hair. It did not struggle, but merely half-stood, half-dangled in the branches, like an old plastic bag. I half expected it to be afraid after the spade incident, when it had demonstrated remarkable agility and a clear survival instinct. Instead, it remained immobile, inert, to all intents and purposes, inanimate. However I became aware of a strange brooding presence. A form of intention hanging about it, for want of a better expression. And it was less plant-like, despite its environment. More ... female.

That was when I gave her clothing. An old red T-shirt that covered her like a dress and, more to the point, covered that gash. After this, she lay for a long time in the wet ground of spring and in the dry ground of summer, until her T-shirt was completely rotted away. When she re-emerged, as she inevitably did, I had to find her one of Sarah's discarded housedresses I was going to tear up as dusters. It was pink nylon. She had grown and so had her scar, from a curling pucker that resembled a long cutworm to a long pale root that stretched deep into her gown. She already looked about fourteen years old. 'No growth hormone for you,' I muttered, trying to remember how bulbs propagated themselves.

And that was our pattern. Life would settle down and continue as normal, but sooner or later there she would be again, remarkably more mature, but still mute and plant-like. Always the same, and yet always taking me by surprise. I found that I could move her from bed to bed and rebury her with no more ado than planting a small tree. Sometimes, when the ground was especially hard in summer, I'd hire indigent alcoholics to do the work, taking care to drape her in sacking, to emphasize her plantlikeness. Sometimes the men would return for another handout, but never for long. Drink makes people unreliable, I find.

I eventually discovered that if I kept her deep enough, I could forget who she was and then I could be who I wanted to be. I could forget temporarily, although I'd always be reminded in the end. As I became used to her ways, I found I had developed a type of intuition that allowed me to sense where and how active she was. For instance, I can feel her turning now under the cherry tree over there, her mouth full of sand. That's why I keep the TV on all day. Gives me something else to concentrate on.

* * *

I feel her sometimes when I'm lying in the bath. I can feel her lying beneath me, deep in the earth, away from the sun, where it's still cold and damp. I can feel her in my spinal cord, in the marrow of my bones. Her thin arms are like tree roots thrusting through the earth, her body like a fallen trunk, through which the beetle-larvae and cutworms crawl. Lying in my own bed, half asleep, I hear her turning over under her blanket of agapanthus, making their purple heads and thick leaves nod furiously, her own dark head in the winter jasmine. She keeps moving. I buried her again recently. At first I simply buried her to get her out of the way; now I realise that if she isn't comfortable, she's going to keep on moving and I'll have to rebury her. She's becoming increasingly demanding and I'm getting better at digging holes.

I would call her a woman, but she's barely a woman at all. She's a vegetable. She depresses me. I've never actually seen her move since that first time when she got the chop. I've only seen the effects, when she appears somewhere else or when something ... goes missing. I'll be watering or pruning and suddenly I'll see her – or a part of her. A hand, a foot, or perhaps, most disconcertingly, her face, staring up at me from the earth. The longer she stays in the garden, the more like her surroundings she becomes and the more difficult she is to see. The more difficult she is to forget.

I prefer to keep her out of sight. Out of my sight preferably, but certainly out of the sight of others. The Burtons. They don't need to know her. Won't help relations if they do. I'd like a nicely groomed garden and I suspect they would prefer me to have one too. Put a stop to suburban blight. But I'm past fretting about that now. I'm more afraid that she'll spread to their gardens than that the property value will go down. For all I know, she might already have done so. The whole neighbourhood might contain legions of bulb babies sleeping under the earth, waiting to wake. As for the guinea fowl – their cries were a little jarring. But not any more. The survivors stay away now. I haven't been spending much time in the bottom of my garden myself. So why are we in the bottom of the garden? I just need to make sure about something. No, she didn't dig that large hole. I did.

* * *

The subtle undertone of decay set in during summer. You couldn't smell it at first. It increased with the heat. Something warm, something sweet, something cloying. The cosiness of corruption. It was thickest around the green and stagnant fish pond under the lemon tree. When the pond is empty, irises grow in the mulch or blue and purple lobelia, left over from the previous owner, a proper gardener. But in the rainy season, winter, the gutters and concrete water channels flow into the pond and resurrect the water creatures, wake the larvae, recall the algae, beckon the frogs back home. Sometimes the water lies for weeks before draining away. I was worried that the Burtons would start complaining about the smell again.

It was soon after, a Tuesday in fact, that the plant woman rose from the stagnant pool. I was coming through the garden gate when I saw her half out of the water, dripping with slime that was green against her face, like hair. It dripped into her eyes. She was, I expect, kneeling in her bedraggled shift, but seeming to stand upright in the shallow water. At first I thought she was the reporter rising from her spot under the lemon tree where I'd buried her. Took a while to make her stay down, I can tell you, but I'm getting better at that. Luckily I noticed her scar before I was compelled to bury her again.

She stared at me and I stared at her. Questions haunted me. With what should I replace the dress when it was worn out? What would best survive her environment? I considered sewing her an apron of fig leaves. At least that could be easily replaced. But then what about winter? I next saw her standing in the dawn, outlined against the pink and orange sky, among the haded ibises. They flew away with the rising sun. But she remained stock still, in Sarah's old housedress, now begrimed and growing its own ecosystem. It did not go well with her complexion, but at least she was mostly covered.

I pray that the woman won't wander far. I'll never hear the end of it if she crops up in someone else's dahlias. Neighbourhood Watch and dark looks. I don't have the strength for awkward greetings in the street. Those 'I thought we agreed ...' conversations underpinned by tooth-baring smiles. 'Did you hear about that child going missing?' Then they'll look at me as if I had something to do with it, when the little tykes are so small that they can disappear all by themselves. I haven't spoken to the Burtons a lot lately. We all watch TV, but not together. Our fences are not always as good as they could be, so sometimes things

get through. I note that there are patches of guinea fowl feathers on their lawn too. Easier to see the patches there – their lawn is better mowed, with neater edges and no hummocks. Their beds are better too. Couldn't hide much in that garden. Along the street, our neighbours are cleaning up the area, getting rid of the trash. Keeping out the other. The people who aren't like us.

Meanwhile I have finally found something she likes, though, that I like too. I can tell her my woes. Sometimes, when I don't know where she is, I'll sit in the garden and start talking about my day. I'll feel her listening to me, feel her watching me intently. Then I'll turn and see the outline of her mossy face amid the trees. A vague white shape among the tricolour prunus trees, a clammy contrast to their plum-dark leaves. Floating and sickly, a corpse-candle. Sometimes she crouches, spider-like, thin legs and soft body, waiting for something to come her way, picking at the scar on her shoulder. Yes, I have fed her deliberately sometimes. Not looking at her. It was easier that way. And I am sure that woman who came last spring really was from the municipality, despite what she claimed about being a reporter.

* * *

Today the bulb is deep in the bottom of the garden. I can see the evidence – upturned daisy bushes, clawed molehills, guinea fowl feathers – and the present I left her in spring is entirely gone. Autumn is here and the garden is full of fallen leaves. Soon the winter rains will come. But I have decided not to tidy up. My head spins with the rustling and chattering above me. The earth hums beneath my feet. Ichor burns through my veins – I weep scalding tears. My skin isn't what it used to be although I keep it hydrated with expensive creams which are supposed to keep it dewy fresh. It has become too moist and has gone completely green beneath the epidermis. You can see it in certain lights. A sheen, a mussel nacre. I keep to myself these days. I haven't found time to get to the dermatologist. My hair rustles like leaves or long grass in the wind, still dry despite my oil treatment. I could swear there is moss in the lines on my skin. Winter is coming. I can feel her moving towards me in the dark, a ghostly jellyfish on a phantom tide. I can see her cheeks blown out like medlars, sticky red and green.

Despite this, I have come to believe that one day the woman might lie down in the garden and stretch out her finger-roots, deep into the earth, like blind white worms. Her face will green into leaves and her hair will grow into grass. Her eyes will become daisy wheels like the sun. And her body will shrug off its scars. One day she might be beautiful. One day I might wake to find soil under my nails.

Made of Mukwa

Ellen Banda-Aaku

When I drove 421km to bury Master Andrew it wasn't to see him put to rest, nor was it to pray for the repose of his soul, that's the last thing I wished him. I went for the bed.

At the time Master Andrew died, in 1990, I hadn't seen him in twenty-one years. But the moment I stepped into the house, once ours, I felt him. I smelt him, I heard him. I saw the chickenpox scars that perforated his flat wide nose. His presence was so strong; Master Andrew might as well have been there. I imagined him standing in the doorway in his starched trousers and white shirt buttoned right up to his collar; he always wore white. I imagined his head almost touching the door frame, his round glasses perched on the tip of his nose, and a crease on his forehead. He would have felt displeasure at these, his mourners, for having entered his living room. That they were mourning him wouldn't have mattered. Master Andrew's left eye would be twitching in anger at the sight of uninvited guests stepping and spilling over his *new carpet*. He would still consider it new even though it had been laid well before we all left him, and was so worn it felt more like a sack underfoot than carpet.

Master Andrew never let go. That's why I was sure that after two decades, the bed would still be there.

The only people I recognized at the funeral were Master Andrew's cousin Papa and Papa's wife Na Ketu. The mourners put up a good show. They tossed themselves at my feet and rolled about calling Master Andrews' name. Some wailed and said that if it were possible they would take my grief and bear it for me. Others howled, saying that if they could have died in Master Andrews' place they would have. People have short memories and what they do remember is erased by time.

Although I didn't know the mourners, they had obviously heard of me. *Nali. Master Andrews' eldest daughter. The cruel one who had abandoned her father, left with all her siblings in tow. Nali, the one with a lot of money. The one who was there when it happened.*

* * *

At the funeral, amongst strangers, and still with Master Andrew's ghost hovering over me, I couldn't sleep. So I crept over the piles of snoring women lying on Master Andrew's carpet turned sack and let myself out the door. Outside, men slept curled up in chairs around the dying fire. I found a stool away from the house and sat there. I could breathe again. I could think. I could remember, without pretending to grieve for Master Andrew. Sitting under the jacaranda tree, I thought of Mama. And I thought of the bed.

It was 1966 or 1967 when Master Andrew built it. I can't remember the year for sure. I do remember that a dozen or so burly students, square shouldered and with calves bulging like oranges, dragged the trunk of a big Mukwa tree into our yard. They had felled it because its roots had started to lift the classroom building from its foundation, at the small school where Master Andrew was Head Master. It was the longest, widest tree trunk we had ever seen.

Master Andrew stripped the bark of this Mukwa and boiled it for hours. Then he poured the brown liquid into a drum and ordered that my sisters and I drink a cupful everyday to prevent disease. The first two days I blocked my nose and gulped it down. Then one after the other, I blocked my sisters' noses', six in all. When they gasped I poured the thick, bitter liquid down their gaping mouths. On the third day, I watered Master Andrew's cabbages and onions with the mukwa bark water. That year his vegetables were Malaria and Yellow-fever free.

Master Andrew sawed the trunk into planks and laid them on the roof top of our house to dry. Everyday of those weeks, he climbed up a ladder to inspect his wooden planks. He inspected them with the same vigilance he inspected his students at morning assembly.

Eventually, satisfied that the wood had dried, Master Andrew set to work. Sleeves rolled up, evenly on both sides, a pencil stuck behind his ear, he banged, measured and ruled. He nailed, glued and varnished.

‘Na Nali, mother of Nali,’ Master Andrew would say as he worked, ‘keep your bush babies away from my bed.’ He would laugh whenever he said it, showing all his teeth, but his eyes didn’t laugh. When he called us bush babies he looked at Mama. We had inherited her big eyes.

Mama told me it was meant as a joke when Master Andrew called us bush babies. But I wondered why Master Andrew’s joke, told over and over again, didn’t make me laugh.

‘Come and see!’ Some days as Master Andrew worked he would call us over to show off his handy work.

As he expected, we nodded and smiled at the bed.

Other days he taunted us.

‘Watch.’ He would point his index finger at his eye. ‘I’m making the strongest bed you will ever come across. You had better look now, because once I’ve finished it and carried into my room you will never see it. It’s for my son,’ Master Andrew declared, his eyebrows white from sawdust. ‘Everything I have, I’ll leave to my son.’

Master Andrew always spoke of his imaginary son. Everything good would happen to his son.

By the end of the school holiday the Mukwa tree had metamorphosed into a bed. A hideous square of deep red wood with a rounded headboard, sitting on four stubs.

When Master Andrew said we would never see his bed, he had forgotten the power Gordon’s Gin had on him. He often boasted that he didn’t drink katubi from a calabash through a reed like a poor black man. Or chibuku, which made men burp and left maize segments between the teeth. He drank Gordon’s Dry Gin, like a white man, from a small flat bottle the size of his palm, with a red lid, and when Master Andrew drank this gin, on occasions that were rare but memorable, he changed. I had seen men yell, scream and break things when under the influence, but Master Andrew changed for the better. He changed from the man who threw his food at Mama if it wasn’t hot enough or salty enough, to a man who sang and danced with bush babies.

Topped with gin, Master Andrew would stagger home singing. From the gate he would call out:

‘Bana Master Andrew bali kwi? Where are the children of Master Andrew?’

‘Tuli kuno Tata Tulu kuno. We are here Tata we are here,’ we would chorus and race to the front door to meet him. Tata, it was the

only time we called him Tata. Every other time we called him Master Andrew. Everyone called him Master Andrew. But with the gin in him, singing along with us, Tata would lead us into his bedroom the way the Pied Piper led the children of Hamelin into the mountain. It was our fairytale.

Our heels drummed against the wooden base when we perched on his bed singing. He allowed us to untie his shoe laces and take off his socks. He had soft, light brown, feet. We danced the Twist, as we imitated Chubby Checker. Sinjonjo to high life tunes. Intoxicated with the pleasure of Master Andrew's attention, we wanted to go on forever. Even when we knocked our shins, or toes against the Mukwa base we didn't stop. We made the most of those occasions. We knew that when Master Andrew woke up the next morning he would be raging mad. And because he couldn't inflict pain on an empty bottle of gin, he would unleash his anger on Mama.

Mama didn't talk much. When she did she whispered. My early memories of Mama are of her with a baby attached to her hip or sitting on her lap. Or of a toddler, sometimes two, standing around her, clutching onto the hem of her dress. She spent her time shaking toddlers away. Those days it seemed to me that as soon as one baby crawled off Mama's lap, another one grew in her belly. I tried to help. From the age of six I fed Mama's babies. I cleaned their sticky, smelly bottoms under a gushing cold water tap. I patted them to sleep whilst mama was cooking, or cleaning, or soothing her bruised body with a cool sponge.

It was about three years after Master Andrew built his bed, that I last saw her. I heard Master Andrew leave the house late one night so I went to check on Mama. She was curled up on the bed. Covered in a white sheet. I saw a blotch of bright red on the sheet. She heard me call her name, uncovered her head and tried to smile at me. She put her finger to her lips to stop me screaming. She needn't have, my scream caught in my throat. Her face was bruised, swollen as if air had been pumped into it.

Through cut and bleeding lips, Mama begged me to keep quiet. She said if I told anyone, Master Andrew would be locked away and then who would look after us? She asked me to lie beside her, just for a minute. She said I must listen to what she had to say. Mama said Master Andrew was a good man but nature had been unfair to him. Nature had

denied him a son. And because of this Master Andrew was tormented by Demons.

I imagined short red men with horns dancing around in Master Andrew's head. Calling him names. Throwing stones at him. Mama said one day, when I was older, I would understand. She asked that when the sky turned grey and the birds started singing in the tree outside, I go and lie down with my sisters. Mama promised everything would be okay in the morning. But I didn't hear the birds. Two women shook me awake and led me from the room.

Then they took Mama away. I left the room, but the feel of Mama's body beside me, as cold as a fish, stayed with me forever.

Sitting on my stool, I stared at Master Andrew's house. I smelt the damp soil, firewood smoke, fear. Age and time hadn't altered the sense of terror and loneliness that I associated with the house, once a landmark.

When you turn onto the road leading towards the Boma look out for a white house on the right. Quarter of a mile so or past it you'll see the sign for the Missionary School for Boys. It's the headmaster's house. It has a wire fence and beautiful gardens. You can't miss it.

So passers-by dropped off their bus, or parked their cars at our house to ask for directions. And we would stand straight and speak good English, born of Master Andrew's torture: every Sunday, the Sundays he was home, he made us recite the rules of grammar. We chanted:

*Noun is a name of anything,
A school or garden, hoop or string,
Verbs tell of something done
To read, write, count, or run.*

We memorised verses:

Mr An follows Mr A, Mr E, Mr I, O, U.

We impressed guests with our English. We made Master Andrew proud. We made him proud of himself.

But Master Andrew's house lost its glory. It was dwarfed by taller houses, by street lights and tarred roads. The house succumbed to neglect. Creepers grew out of cracks in the wall. Cardboard had replaced two broken windows. The veranda that once shone after Mama had smeared bright red floor polish on it, had turned grey and was crumbling at the edges like a biscuit.

It was a house of secrets. Words whispered through the white walls. Letters in Mama's trunk, tucked between the folds of her cloth. Pictures in a brown envelope, which also contained seven shrivelled umbilical cords in a crumpled piece of paper. Mama planned to bury them one day in her village, where they would be safe with her ancestors.

It was a house of indiscernible sounds. Thuddings against the floor and wall. Crying muffled into pillows. Tentative footsteps, creaking across the floor.

When the sun came up and the mourners started to stir, I made my way back into the living room and crouched on the floor amongst the mourners. They bustled about the house, preparing for the burial. They besieged me with questions:

Ba Nali, what shirt should we dress the body in?

Ba Nali, the chief says Master Andrew will be buried like a chief. Isn't it an honour?

Ba Nali, the beer is finished. Can you give us money to buy more?

Ba Nali, a man from the family should be chosen to take on Master Andrew's name so his spirit lives on, who shall we chose?

I sent for Papa.

'Nali, what about his belongings?' Papa staggered in with a plastic container of chibuku.

He sat beside me. As a child the cataract in his left eye had scared me. 'I'm sure you don't need any of his things,' he said. 'What with the wealth we hear you have been blessed with. I am poor man. All I can hope for is my brother's bed.'

'Why should you have it?' Someone amongst the mourners asked. And an animated conversation broke out.

Papa let the argument flow for a while then he interrupted. 'If anyone here, once!' – he held up a long-nailed finger for emphasis – 'I say once! came and washed Master Andrew's buttocks when he lay dying in that bed, stand up.'

Silence. Everyone looked for a place other than Papa's face to fix their eyes.

'Ahem,' Papa grunted. 'I was the only one who stayed with this man when he was down.' Point made, he rose and made for the door.

'Papa.' I called him back. 'I will decide what happens to that bed.'

The cataract over Papa's eye glinted as the light reflected off the opaque pearliness. He started to lift his finger but I held up my hand to stop him. 'Let's discuss this in private.'

The mourners jammed into the corridor behind Papa and me as we stood by the door to Master Andrew's bedroom. My heart started racing and the taste in my mouth changed. I checked my shivers as I watched Na Ketu untie a key from a knot tucked in her headscarf.

Gingerly, I followed her into the room. Papa followed close behind. The bed was gone. The bed that stood in its place was of white wood with a square headboard. A matching dresser and wardrobe stood against the wall. The room was not the image I had held in my head.

I staggered.

'Are you okay?' Na Ketu gripped my elbow.

'This is all I'm asking for.' Papa looked around the room then at me.

'The bed?' I looked at Papa.

'The bed?' Papa looked surprised. Then the tension in his face eased. 'Arrh, you are asking about that old bed your father made?' I nodded.

'Aah, that big bed he made of Mukwa,' Papa said. 'It's been locked in the storeroom for years. I'll show you.'

We moved outside. The crowd followed. Disapproving, murmuring that a man's possessions should not be discussed before he was laid to rest.

Papa led us to the storeroom door and ordered a young man to axe off the bolt.

Hesitantly, I walked in. There, covered in dust, cobwebs and bird-droppings, was Master Andrew's buffalo-sized bed.

One side of the bed broke away as it was carried out by a batch of young men. The nails no longer held the wooden planks together; they stuck out, detached from the base like incisors. They put the bed down. I stood over the wreck. Myself a wreck. Tears pricked at my eyelids, my gut churned, emotion bubbled inside me. I contained them. For a minute or two, until Papa opened his mouth.

He said, 'I told you its old and rotten. Now let's go and bury your father instead of wasting time here.'

Papa's words woke the beast that had been sleeping inside me. I heard myself roar. I grabbed the axe off the floor and started hacking savagely at the wood.

I remember few details. The ball of red fire felt whirling in my head. Splinters cutting into my flesh. Buttons popping off my blouse. Pain searing through my upper arms and shoulders. Sweat trickling down my face and thighs. The screams from the stunned crowd when I waved the axe at anyone who dared to stop me.

Eventually, when I tired, I dropped the axe, walked back to the house, picked up my bags and left Master Andrew's house for good.

Mama was so wrong. Master Andrew was never there for us. She was wrong. I never fully understood. Mama, everything wasn't okay that morning when the birds started singing.

As always, Master Andrew got what he wanted. A son did inherit his house. In his later years, he had fathered a son with a woman younger than I was at the time. Too young to remember or worry that what happened to Mama might happen to her.

And I'm certain, that when the mourners spoke later of what I did at Master Andrews funeral, they said; *Nali, Master Andrew's eldest daughter? The one who abandoned her father? That's right, Nali, she's the one with the big house in the city. She axed her father's old bed to pieces!*

They must have said in hushed tones, She's the one who was there when it happened. Aaar haah! That bed is in pieces, the bed where it happened.

Goodnight, Sleep Tight

Joanne Hichens

‘It’s time to wean Luke from our bed, Angela,’ Paul says. ‘Move him into his own room. We’ve got to do something. Reclaim our space. Good time to do it now, with things so up in the air with the move.’

You know how it is with children when they share their parents’ bed, they start off sleeping parallel, straight like a ruler next to you, dead to the world. Then at what stage does it start, the gradual repositioning? So you wake up with kiddy toes digging into your midriff, or you’re head-butted as your child thrashes through some unquiet moment. Not a nightmare, of course. What is there to be afraid of, with your mom and dad lying right there flanking you on either side? And if our Luke was ever restless, I would soothe him, stroke his back and comfort him till he drifted off to dreamland again. This is after all, what a mother does. A mother protects her child and keeps him safe.

That’s why we moved in the first place. We’ve been in our security estate haven one week now. There’re good schools nearby, there’s a sense of community, a sense of camaraderie about the place. Here Luke can play in the garden. This isn’t Lagunya or the Cape Flats where you have to keep your child in your sights one hundred percent of the time in case he gets snatched from the front stoep by a tik-head rapist. And with crime the way it is, the way we lived in Observatory up the line was hardly better, with our dog, and Paul with his gun, saying ‘let them come’, and me on the lookout every night from the top floor of our Victorian semi, checking constantly our garage hadn’t been bust into, checking no skollie was ripping copper pipes from our walls, peering into the street at prostitutes and scum drug dealers plying their respective trades.

‘I hear you, Paul. I know it’s time. Tonight we start.’

In our new condo that smells of fresh paint and varnish, Luke and I hunker down in his bed, reading, my boy lying in the crook of my arm,

till I dog-ear the page and put the paperback on the bedside table. He sits up and hugs me, light shining through his shell-shaped ears that'll make a plastic surgeon decent money some day when we pay to have them pinned back. The luminous pink blush of blood there, the life I gave him.

Luke grabs my hand, 'Read more, Mom.' All I can think is how many pages of *What Bumosaur Is That?* can a mother endure? What I want to do is frisbee the book of butts and farts right out the open window.

I pull the duvet under his chin. 'No, Luke, it's time for shut-eye.' I switch off the bedside light, and kiss Luke nighty-night, still trying to extricate myself from the skinny arms grappling with me, Luke grumbling all the while, 'Mom don't go, don't go, I want to sleep in *our* bed!'

Keeping calm, all the time keeping calm, I say, 'Luke, *this* is your bed now.'

'When I go to big school, Mom, then I'll sleep in my own bed!'

'Of course you will, Luke. But you're gonna try it out tonight.' Parenting books insist you set strong boundaries from the start, experts give advice on how to get your new-born sleeping in his own cot in three nights, but I'd never been one for letting my kid cry for hours on end. But now I snap. 'You're five years old, Luke. You've gotta sleep in your own bed.'

'Please, Mom, lie with me one last minute? Please?'

So I do. I sigh. I can't help it, blowing hot and cold. Trying to cherish my son in the soft glow of the night lamp, feeling him burrow close, sneaking his small hands under my tee shirt, when what I really want is to get to *Desperate Housewives*. Damp, chubby fingers clutch at my love-handle flesh like a baby baboon holding on for dear life to his mother. Then Luke starts rolling his index finger in my navel and I'm thinking, why d'you do this, Luke? This early exploration of orifices? Is this a hint of your instinctive sexuality, of arousal on some level, or just a comfort, akin to the way some girlies twirl their hair around their pinkie fingers, and other children suck dummies till their teeth are skew? I giggle, 'No Sweetie,' at this tickling, his unconscious habit. I pull his hands free, but as the game goes, he works small paws back under my tee shirt and dips his finger into my belly button, the hollow, the knot, the reminder of the connection to another, to mother. Me.

‘This is where we were first joined, Luke. You and me.’

‘Aren’t we joined anymore, Mom?’

‘We’ll always be joined. I’m in your heart and you’re in mine.’

I hold one warm and sticky hand; the fingernails, I’d seen earlier, are caked with dirt from playing in the sandpit at school, doing playdough, painting. I wonder what he’ll be one day, hopefully something more creative than a bean counter like his dad. Then again Paul’s way with money has paid for the new house. Nothing to sneeze at, with its sliding doors and views and every mod-con. I wipe the sweaty fringe from Luke’s forehead. Dark has come, but the heat hasn’t let up, even with a breeze starting off the sea. ‘My Lukie,’ I say, ‘you have to bath tomorrow.’ Though I can smell clean-boy skin at the creases of his neck, Luke is made of slugs and snails and puppy-dogs tails.

Finally I pull myself up. Plant my feet firmly on the ground.

‘C’mon, Luke, time for shut-eye, everyone is tired. Really it’s time for bed now.’

‘Don’t wanna sleep!’ He turns his back to me in a small sulk. ‘Want to be with you, Mom!’

‘Luke, go to sleep now.’ A bark this time. I’ve had it.

‘The tokolosh is gonna get me, Ma ...’ He turns to look at me.

‘Nothing’s gonna get you, Luke,’ I promise my child. ‘No alien, no monster, no evil Doctor Nappy, no tokolosh, no nothing’s gonna get you!’ I make the promise every child believes. Everything will be just fine. How can a mother lie? And to make sure he sleeps straight off, I say, ‘There’ll be a surprise for you in the morning if you go to sleep now!’

‘Yeah? Like what?’ he’s brightening up.

‘You’ll see.’

Luke, consoled by the bribe, squeezes his eyes shut tight, says ‘Okey, dokey.’

I latch the door on my son and his bug-box, his jars of springs and wires and switches collected from broken remote control cars and planes, on his Lego, his action men, and all the boxes of boy-toys and stuff I still have to unpack ... but not tonight. I breathe a sigh of relief, Luke’ll be out in three, his face slack and soft in sleep and I can relax. Only then, as I’m still standing at Luke’s latched door, I feel hands on my breasts, cupping, then squeezing, Paul’s saying, ‘I’ve been waiting for you, Angela!’ He pulls me down the passage towards our bedroom. ‘You know, we haven’t made love in our bed since we moved in!’

‘We haven’t made love in our bed for years, Paul,’ I tease him.

How could we have had sex in the communal bed, the shared space, *our* bed, as Luke puts it? We’d fucked everywhere else. Once even on our Pilates ball, we’d had awkward, messy sex, rolling around, stifling our laughter with mouthfuls of each other, whilst Cartoon Network took care of Luke.

I’m worn out tonight, on edge, feeling on the brink of overcome by the hassles, by all the bloody mundane jobs a mother does, catering to every need, I’m still wiping Luke’s bum for God’s sakes! But Paul is insistent. On the bed he unzips my denims, wasting moments with kisses and fondling and stroking.

I slip his hands between my legs. I play with his cock, hard and ready, and we do it right off with our shirts and socks on, jeans and pants at our ankles, a standard quickie – satisfying for him maybe – after feeble attempts at foreplay. Who has the energy? Affection, that’s what the end of the day is for, reassurance, holding, containment.

I only miss ten minutes of *Desperate Housewives*, then with my forty-five minute escape from reality over, I switch off the TV. The heat is stifling. The whisper of a sea breeze has given in to the stillness of a windless summer night. I open a lounge window onto the enclosed garden. With crime the way it is we’ve ordered burglar bars. They haven’t come yet, but I’m not worried here in our walled suburban security estate. Our clean-living seaside suburb populated with conservative voters and pensioners. The pace dull and steady, the way we like it, the way we want it. A safe place for Luke to grow up in.

I wipe sweat from my chest, switch off lights, at last content to join Paul in sleep. What is it with men? From sex to sleep, like zero to one hundred in five seconds. I shake him a little, pull the twisted sheet from his waist to remind him I’m here and he makes space for me, our arms wrapping around each other and our perfect life.

I don’t know what time it is when a small tapping at my shoulder wakes me.

‘I can’t bloody believe you’re letting him back in our bed, Angela,’ grouses Paul, as I let Luke climb over me into the middle. ‘The kid klaps me in my sleep, the cat walks on my face, enough already!’ Paul huffs and ups and offs with his pillow, settling himself as he has hundreds of times before, in Luke’s bed.

The adolescent kitten stretches and purrs next to me in a show of solidarity, as if this is all part of the plan to get the bed to ourselves. I stroke Luke's cheek, thinking, how is it skin can be so soft? I let him snuggle close, seeing in the moonlight his dark eyelashes fluttering briefly and settling at last on slightly flushed cheeks. Paul snores to his heart's content in his son's room, under the new Spiderman duvet. I like to think Paul's travelling back in his dreams to a childhood where kids could ride bikes and skateboard in the streets and spend long hours playing in open fields, playing catch or soccer and their parents didn't freak out about them being abducted.

I stretch out in the extra space, stroke the length of the lavender-scented kitten, so perfumed after late night forays for lizards in the bushes. Luke and I stretch out. I hold my boy's hand in mine, I smell his sweet breath exhaled with the rise and fall of his chest, his breath still minty from the Aquafresh tooth-brushing. At least we got that right, conquered Gerry Germ; and just as Doc Seuss promised, sleep time comes, full of dreams and bliss and slumbering peace.

The intermittent whirr and hum of Paul's power tools wakes me, but Luke hardly stirs. Paul insists on building the jungle gym at the side of the house himself. We could have got an expert to come do it, but this is my Paul proving his dedication to fatherhood. I try to be grateful I have a good man who not only takes care of his kid, but still wants to make love with me, fuck me. There're a lot of marriages I know don't work this way.

The heat of the morning dehydrates my gums and tongue with every intake of breath. I collect a load of washing which will dry soon enough in the heat.

Paul potters in from the garden, his work with jig-saw and drill abandoned. He kisses me tenderly on the back of my neck and I turn and kiss him back on the mouth, a sort of apology for the middle-of-the-night squabble.

'I want him Luke out of our bed too, Paul, but can't we take it in stages? I don't want to send him away if he says he's frightened.'

'You're such a soft touch, Angela,' he smiles.

We sit together in the new country-style kitchen with wood paneling, homey, like a family kitchen should be, the one thing I'd insisted on with everything so new, and chat about everything and

nothing as Chef Paul scrambles eggs for breakfast and I pop waffles in the toaster and load it all – jam and butter and juice – on a tray, taking it out to the deck which overlooks the swimming pool and the trampoline and every toy we’ve bought to keep Luke safe and coming home. I insisted on it. My reasoning is Luke’ll invite his buddies over to swim, maybe bring his grandchildren over one day to enjoy it all, it’s so stunning here. With a view of the sea in the distance, a haze on it today, like a dream, the blue mountains across the Bay soft-focus, it’s idyllic and I feel like the luckiest woman in the world.

‘Time to get a new pup,’ Paul says, and I’m back to reality, checking out our boxer sprawled in the sun, his legs in the air, his gums loose and sloppy in sleep, his pink belly exposed. ‘And time to wake Luke to come eat. I don’t want him playing around with my power tools.’

‘Shit, Paul. You didn’t leave them out there, did you?’ I say, passing the semi-constructed climbing frame and breathing a sigh of relief Luke’s not there, not a danger to himself with Paul’s drill and blades, hasn’t taken an eye out or sawn off a finger.

I check the bed, but Luke’s not there. Luke’s up already, peeing I bet, that golden arc never quite reaching the toilet bowl, leaving splatters on the seat and tiles I’ll have to clean up. But he isn’t in the bathroom either.

‘Luke, don’t let me catch you helping yourself!’ I don’t mind the way he pulls chairs about and scrambles on them to get what he wants without asking me first, but I don’t want spills this morning, juice coagulating on the counter or Coco-Pop crumbs underfoot, in my new kitchen. I want to eat breakfast before the eggs get cold – nothing worse than cold eggs. But he’s not in the kitchen. ‘Lukie, what’re you doing, sweetheart? Come have brekkie.’

When he doesn’t answer, I call, ‘Paul, is Luke with you?’

‘Luke?’ I hear Paul. ‘Not with me, babe.’

In the bedroom I pull the duvet up and over the base of our bed, I check under it. I stare at the curtain lifted for an instant by the warm wind rising all of a sudden, the curtain billowing there at the open burglar-bar free window. I hear a frantic edge to my voice as if it belongs to someone else, as I yell, ‘Jesus Christ, Paul,’ I’m running outside, ‘where is he?’

As if he reads my mind, Paul says, ‘Don’t worry, he’s around here somewhere.’

I feel it in my chest, my throat, the heat, the burning, my skin on fire.

‘My God, he’s gone, someone’s taken him.’ I hear my voice, shrill.

‘Angela, calm down, the dog would’ve barked if someone was on the property!’

‘Dog’s so old he won’t bark if an axe murderer kills us all in the fucking house!’

‘Christ, Angela, take it easy ...’

‘Luke, where the hell are you?’ I scream, I run into the spare bedroom, check again in the bathrooms, open the opaque shower doors. No Luke. Anywhere. ‘There’re still builders about, strangers, those bloody men at the side of the road ...’

‘... this is a security estate for God’s sake.’

‘Maybe he got out somehow ...’

‘The security gate’s locked,’ says Paul. ‘Too high for a five year old to climb over. Bars’re too close set for him to squeeze through. Shockoloza on the walls. He has to be here, stop bloody panicking, Angela.’ He raises his voice, ‘You playing hide ’n seek, Luke?’

In Luke’s bedroom, I sit on the edge of his bed with the portable phone, I try calling the police but I can’t remember which button to press to turn the phone on, the panic running through my veins anesthetizes me. I’m sobbing, ‘Where’s my boy?’ Where’s the panic button for the armed response?

Then I know, I just feel it in my bones, it’s no criminal that’s got Luke.

‘Jesus, the pool, Paul!’ I run to the swimming pool. I roll back the cover. I imagine Luke’s naughty fingers untying the stays, Luke a poor swimmer, slipping into the cool water the same clear over-chlorinated blue as his eyes, maybe he bumped his head on the silver tiles. But no drowned child lies at the bottom.

My God, where is he?

It’s then we hear the deafening crack. Coming from where? The street? An accident? Not outside. From inside.

We’d looked everywhere hadn’t we? What was that sound, like a window slamming violently shut in the wind?

* * *

It's in the walk-in cupboard in our bedroom we find him. He's crying. There's snot running down his face, 'Don't be cross, Mom,' he says. 'I found my surprise. See? Daddy hid it, but I found it.'

'That's mine,' Paul says, edging towards Luke. 'Give it to me, Luke. Now.' His voice is flat. Calm. No edge of hysteria.

I have my hand over my mouth, I'm holding back the sobs. My boy is here, alive. I want to rush and grab him in my arms, tell him I will read Captain Underpants *ad infinitum*; I will build puzzles with you, Luke, and play cricket, whatever you want, I'll do it with you! We'll eat ice cream for breakfast and lunch and supper, I love you, I love you, I love you, Luke, I want to say, clamping my hand tight over my mouth. As Paul reaches for the gun, Luke says, 'I found it under the mattress, Mom. It was all lumpy there. I thought it was for me, Mom.' He's looking at me as Paul reaches for the pistol and I hear that crack again. I flinch at the thunder in my bedroom.

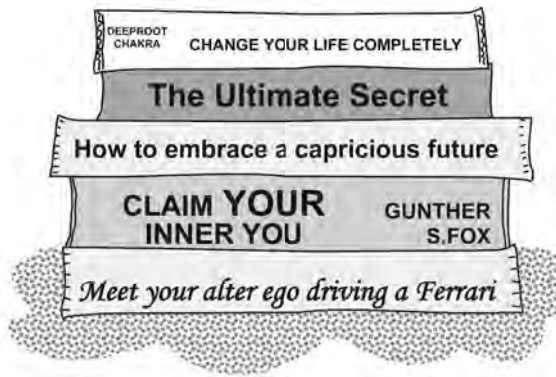
What the hell, Paul ... Why isn't the gun in the safe, Paul? I'm thinking, as I put my hand to my chest. I pull it away. Red. Like the paint on Luke's hands that one time we did finger painting at home, what a mess.

I'm gonna stain the new carpet, I'm thinking as I fall, and Luke comes to me and holds my hand, both his hands hold mine, as Paul punches buttons on the ...

Divine Possibilities, Rewards Uncertain

Erika Coetzee

Donna loved self-help books. She kept a pile of them on her bedside table, right under the lamp, so that she could grasp one at a moment's notice when an unexpected passage wanted to speak to her soul. On the day that Donna took to her bed, her pile of bedside books included titles like ...



'You never read any of these books from start to finish,' Donna's daughter Lulu complained more than once.

'Don't be silly,' Donna said. 'That misses the point of trusting the mysterious ways in which the Infinite communicates with the Higher Self!' Much as she tried, Donna couldn't quite explain how they called to her, these books, how they prodded her with uncanny hints and directions.

For example, that very morning, upon waking, Donna had grabbed her copy of *Claim Your Inner You*, the new international best-seller by

Gunther S. Fox. With her eyes still heavy with sleep, she had hugged the book tightly to her solar plexus.

‘Guide me with your wisdom,’ she had whispered to the book. After three deep cleansing breaths, she rubbed her hands together until she felt them tingle with self-actualising energy, and let the book fall open to page 287. She allowed her finger to be drawn to the right spot and ... There, at the beginning of the third paragraph (and everyone knew that three was a sacred number), there in black and white, in no uncertain terms, the Universe told Donna:

‘Don’t get out of bed *one more day* not knowing who YOU are.’

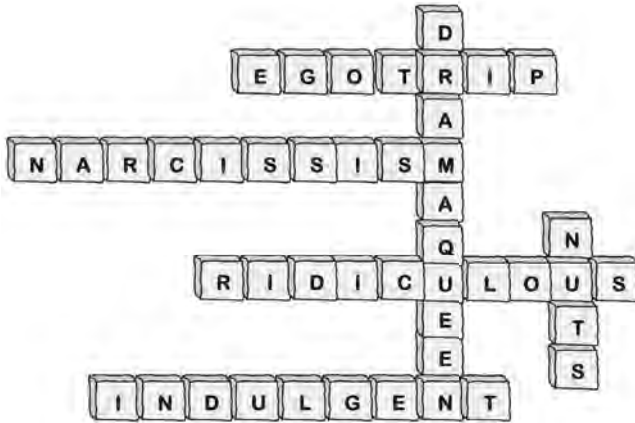
So she didn’t. Donna stayed in bed the next day, and the next day after that. And all the while she kept her self-help books at her side, in case there were more essential messages from (or to) her Higher Self. Because it was true, Donna realised with a flash of insight so powerful she almost choked on her Rejuvenating Ginseng tea, she wasn’t entirely sure who she was.

Donna’s children responded to her new lifestyle choice with stoic resignation, as the thought of trying to change her mind was beyond the realm of their most brazen imaginings. Lulu and her brother Charlie were in their early twenties; both had steady jobs, and neither was yet inclined to move away from home, as their father had done half a decade earlier. Donna’s children were profoundly faithful and unexcitable. They were used to living around the edges of Donna’s seismic shifts and sweeping passions, usually with remarkable resilience, and they interlaced their homely and cheerful outlook with regular games of scrabble.

‘This time she’s asking for a bowl of candied macadamia nuts,’ said Lulu, with only slight exasperation. She was clearing a tray from her mother’s room, laden with plates and cups in need of washing. A glass that had once held a Spirulina milkshake was crusted with tiny green flakes.

‘What next?’ laughed Charlie, who was blessed with unwavering tolerance. ‘I guess she’s not doing any harm.’

So the children shrugged and let their mother be, although traces of resentment occasionally surfaced on their scrabble board.



* * *

Horatio awoke from the shadows of a wild feathery dream exactly one minute before his alarm was set to ring. He lay in the dark for a moment, staring at the reassuring lines of his ceiling. Then he got up from his firm narrow mattress, and made himself one slice of toast, with strawberry jam, and a cup of instant coffee. Horatio chewed each mouthful diligently, wiped his mouth on a paper serviette and washed his lonely dishes one by one. It didn't take long.

The telephone rang. The unfamiliar sound startled Horatio. He picked up the receiver, and noticed that across the room, his bed was still unmade. He never forgot to make his bed.

'The results have come in,' the voice explained on the other end. Horatio listened to the details. He sank onto the chair, reached for a pen and wrote down the numbers. In that instant, he knew they would set the rhythm of his future.

'Let's schedule an appointment to discuss the way forward,' the voice said, and Horatio nodded. After replacing the receiver, he unplugged the telephone from the wall, wound the cord neatly around the base, and locked it away in the hall cupboard, behind the matching blue guest towels he never used.

He returned to his morning routine, which was now behind schedule. He cut short his shower and hardly had enough time to dry properly between his toes. He got dressed in his habitual dark grey suit and bowtie. He knew his colleagues chuckled about the way he dressed

for work; they were mostly young school leavers and desperate to be employed. They wore shoes without laces, hooded jackets, frayed jeans. He stood out like a square peg.

Horatio locked his apartment door and as he stepped into the elevator, he jumped slightly as he caught sight of his own face. Usually he stood with his back to the elevator mirror, descending briskly to the ground floor. But today something made him lean forward and inspect his reflection. It was a dependable face, he thought, clean and solid. For a second, he imagined it was the face of a complete stranger, someone he'd never met.

Then suddenly, Horatio saw a tall, silky top hat appear on the head of the man in the mirror. A rowdy feather boa of purple feathers materialised around his shoulders. The man in the reflection gave an uncultivated grin, doffed his hat, and winked straight at him.

Horatio gasped. His mind started spinning and he felt his spine go weak. He blinked, and when he looked again, his pale reflection had returned to normal. He looked suspiciously into the security camera, then back at the mirror. He saw his old self frowning back, and tried to suppress the unruly thought that the day was conspiring to unhinge him. Horatio felt a small warm stone of surprise deep in the unfamiliar pit of his stomach. Then he continued on his way to the office.

* * *

While Donna whiled away the hours in bed, another message was delivered to her, this time via page 86 of *The Inner Artist Walks Barefoot*. She was reading in the warm light of her Neroli & Musk aromatic candle, when one small drop of wax fell on the significant passage. It instructed her to take up a self-fulfilling hobby.

'I feel strong resonance emanating from my creative kernel,' she said to Charlie one day, as he brought her a package that had arrived in the mail.

Charlie nodded. 'Maybe you've just suppressed your own unique artistic genius so far?' His mother smiled in agreement.

'And it's about to be released,' Donna said as she opened the package, which contained a mail-order correspondence course and practice kit called *Wild Ways with Découpage*. Donna experienced an instant bolt of spiritual confirmation. She spread it all out on the bed:

the glitzy materials and instructions, the fantastic sheets of coloured paper, tubes of paint, gold leaf, varnish and glue. And then she set about covering her room with hosts of angels.

Donna had always felt a special affinity with angels. The attraction was rooted in the undulating landscape of her body type. For Donna had never been a rake-like woman; she had some serious curves. All her life she had fought against her accumulating weight, but now she gave into it. She wanted to become, finally, what her body decreed. She literally decided to be *all* that she could be. She imagined reclining on clouds, shooting love arrows through boughs of stardust. Donna dreamt of angels' wings, unfurled, stroking across her cheek.

She spent hours cutting angels from special order wrapping paper, from angel-themed calendars and inspirational books. She subscribed to angel work magazines and seraphic websites, and diligently glued down cherubs rescued from promotions, packaging and samples. In one online auction, Donna gleefully secured an old brown shoe box full of glitter-edged stickers, all irregular-shaped fragments of sky against which angels lounged and frolicked, seemingly without a care in the world.

Soon the ceiling and walls of her room were papered with cherubs – big unapologetic ones with chubby midribs and rosy complexions, discrete anaemic ones with feather-fine wings, lazy ones and gossipy ones, angels with uncomfortable strappy sandals and others with bells on their toes. Everything was covered: the bed-side tables, the dresser, the mirror frame. The bedposts, the back of the door, the tissue box cover. It was crowded to say the least. The angels inhabited the room's surfaces like a heavenly wrap-around version of *Where's Wally?* Except that Wally was probably not there.

'What's with all the angels?' Lulu asked Charlie after a few weeks had passed. 'That room's looking more and more like some kind of sentimental asylum.'

'It seems to me,' said Charlie, who always saw the bright side of things, 'that she's just wall-papering her life with divine possibilities.'

* * *

Horatio waited the requisite three minutes for his train, disembarked after six stops and made his way to the building where Miracle Merchandise had its call centre. He had been working for the company

for twenty-eight and a half years, since the time when they used to sell real household appliances with real functions, long before they had ‘re-structured’ into a call centre, and a high turn-over sales team of tele-consultants, and a warehouse full of new age paraphernalia.

‘Why on earth do you work in a call centre?’ his young colleagues liked to ask. ‘A guy with your experience ... you could get a real job, with an office.’

To this, Horatio shrugged, ‘This job suits me.’ It was true: he liked the call centre. He liked the rules, and the cubicles, and the scripted sales talk. He was relieved not to be behind a counter or a shop floor, greeting live customers with haphazard demands.

Horatio checked the clock. He was at his desk exactly ten minutes before the phone lines opened. Two entire panels of his cubicle were covered with ‘Employee of the Month’ certificates. He had 129 in all, only fair for someone who had never missed a day’s work, who mastered every new sales script within twenty-four hours. ‘Horatio’s the champion of company policy,’ his colleagues teased, as they congregated around the water cooler.

He sat down in his cubicle, and put on his head-set. He had already fielded twelve calls by the time he heard the Gregorian chants ringing through the call centre. Horatio stood up and looked out across the bowed heads of the other tele-consultants: no-one else seemed perturbed by the noise. He looked around his own cubicle; the light was dappled with folly. There was something wrong with his certificates: they looked all wrong. Horatio blinked and focussed. Every certificate showed an Identikit of himself. They said ‘WANTED: TO SERVE A LIFE SENTENCE’ – 129 times – in bold letters above his face. And below that, in smaller letters, ‘Reward Uncertain’.

For the second time that day, Horatio felt utterly bewildered. He rushed to the men’s room, and splashed water in his face, careful not to glance in the mirror. When he got back to his cubicle, the music had stopped and his certificates were thankfully back in order.

* * *

Within weeks of taking to her bed, Donna’s life was entirely transformed. That’s what *découpage* can do for you. Triumphant she sat in the middle of the queen-size bed, perusing the outcome of her efforts. She

was anticipating, any time now, further instructions from Beyond. In the meantime, she plumped the frothy waterfall of cushions behind her, and took a short break from (inner) self-improvement to paint her nails.

As she sat shaking the bottle of nail polish (in the shade of *Heavenly Crimson*), an advert on the back page of *Manifest* magazine caught her attention. It was a special offer for a pair of angels' wings. Was this some kind of sign? Donna felt the duty of enlightenment weigh heavily upon her. She lowered the bottle of nail polish to balance precariously on her thigh. There were energy vibrations rushing at her from the wings on the page, she was sure of it. Wasn't it absurd? What would she do with a set of wings? At her age? Then Donna remembered it was not her duty to question the strange ways of the Infinite. 'In the Larger Scheme of Things,' Donna said to herself, 'it probably makes perfect sense.'

So she picked up the phone and dialled the number in the advert. It was 1-800-MIRACLE. Donna held her breath, cradling the earpiece in the hollow of her shoulder. Within seconds she heard the call go through and braced herself for the inevitable voice-recorded holding period. She took the brush from the little bottle of *Heavenly Crimson* and absent-mindedly started painting her nails.

Then Donna heard a lifeless voice on the other end of the phone line.

'Welcome to Miracle Merchandise, where we specialise in the spectacular and magnificent. My name is Horatio and I thank you for making us your number one retail choice for life-changing commodities today. Please provide us with your postal address before we continue.'

The voice didn't sound particularly welcoming. Donna swallowed and recited her postal address.

She was about to ask about the wings when she heard the voice start talking again, in the same measured and dull monotone. For a moment, Donna imagined it was a recording. But no, there was a real person on the other end of the line.

'We have a host of tantalising special offers ready and waiting for you at this time,' said Horatio. 'Regular shoppers, please be sure to have your loyalty card numbers handy. If you are a first time caller, rest assured that in the Larger Scheme of Things, your most cherished desires make perfect sense to us.'

Donna dropped the nail polish. A torrent of *Heavenly Crimson* landed across the white cloud of duvet. The deep red stain spread there like a secret laid bare.

She recovered herself and scrambled to lift the phone back to her ear. 'I just spilled a whole bottle of nail polish across my bed,' Donna said. It seemed like an important thing to disclose.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' said Horatio. Donna listened for more words, but there were none.

'You don't sound very sorry,' she said grimly. 'You're not really managing to convey any real empathy, you know.'

'Uhm,' Horatio faltered. 'I *am* sorry. But I try not to deviate from the script.'

'The script?' Donna asked, narrowing her eyes.

'You know ... the script we've been trained to deliver.' Horatio's voice sounded excruciatingly calm. 'It is meant to take no more than three minutes from 'Welcome to Miracle Merchandise' right through to 'Thank you for calling'. We practiced it in the Miracle Tele-Consultant Advanced Training Course. I got it down to two minutes and forty-six seconds.'

'Really?' It was all Donna could think of to say. There was no reply. She took a deep breath and went on. 'So, I interrupted your *script*. My apologies. Or is my two minutes and forty-six seconds already up?'

'The main part of the script only starts after you have chosen one of our life-changing special offers,' said Horatio, from where he sat in the fluorescent glare of the call centre.

'Well, then ...' said Donna.

'So will you?'

'Will I?'

'Commit yourself to one of our mesmerising miracle deals?' he asked evenly. 'Payment can be made in four easy instalments when you choose to become a loyalty lifetime member ...'

'Actually,' Donna interrupted him, 'I was wondering about the angels' wings. I just want to order a set of wings ...'

'To qualify for the wings, you have to sign up for the one-year Spiritual Insurance package. It takes the anxiety out of Soul Searching,' said Horatio.

'I already have insurance,' said Donna.

'But this one comes with a free supply of Purifying Bath Salts.'

'I only need the wings.'

'No insurance, no wings,' Horatio tried to sound as firm as he could. 'It's company policy.'

'What a shame,' said Donna irritably. 'Your script isn't very *flexible*, is it?'

'That's the point of a script. You have to stick to the lines as they're written.'

Donna scoffed. 'Well, goodbye then.'

'Just one more thing,' said Horatio. The fleeting image of a top hat and feather boa skirted his mind, and he was suddenly overwhelmed by a surge of rebellion.

'You *really* don't have to thank me for calling,' said Donna.

'Oh no, it's not that. I just wanted to say ... well, I just wanted to say that you really do have ... the voice of an angel.'

Silence hung in the air. Donna looked around her heavenly room. She glanced up at the ceiling. 'Is that part of your script?' Her voice tiptoed down the phone line.

'Well, no, actually no,' said Horatio. He sounded slightly unhinged.

'What a relief,' said Donna. Still holding the phone, she shuffled out of bed and opened her curtains. She looked up into the purple sky, and for a moment it was nothing less than breath-taking. She wondered where the call centre for Miracle Merchandise found itself. It could be anywhere, really, Delhi or Manila, Dubai, Hong Kong, Johannesburg. It didn't matter.

Back in his cubicle, Horatio smiled. He drew the recycled air of the call centre deep into his lungs, and released it in one miraculous burst of laughter. Instead of fielding the next call, he let it ring, and started removing the certificates from the panels all around him.

* * *

A week later, Donna received a free gift of angels' wings in the mail. They were a bit squashed and worse for wear, but she didn't mind. The wings were strong and robust, thankfully not those paltry ones made from wafer-thin baby-pink netting. No, these were proper angels' wings, wide as an archway, delightfully smooth, in just the right shades of pearl and dove grey, and edged with the finest spread of feathers Donna had ever seen. They were perfect. It all made perfect sense.



Author Biographies

Ellen Banda-Aaku's first book for children, *Wandi's Little Voice*, won the 2004 Macmillan Writers' prize for Africa, New Children's Writer Award. In 2007 she won the Commonwealth Short Story Competition for her story, 'Sozi's Box'. Her short story, 'Lost', was published in *Jambula Tree & other short stories*, The Caine Prize for African Writing 8th Annual anthology. Originally from Zambia, she has lived and worked in Zambia, the UK, Ghana and South Africa. Now based in the UK, she holds a Masters degree in Creative Writing from the University of Cape Town.

Jayne Bauling, based in White River in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa, has enjoyed a successful career in women's fiction, with 17 novels published in the UK. Her teen novel *Eights*, published 2009, won the Macmillan Writer's Prize for Africa. Her poetry has received poetry awards from SAFM and POWA, and has been published in *Ons Klyntji*, *The Lqvwelder*, *ourobos review* and on LitNet. Her poetry is included in POWA's latest *Breaking the Silence* collection, *Murmurs of the Girl in Me*. Short stories and novels were shortlisted for the 2009 Baobab Prize and the Sanlam Prize for Youth Literature 2010. Amongst many interests, she collaborates with other Mpumalanga writers, doing workshops for women living with HIV/AIDS.

Rita Britz, a qualified tour guide and a passionate traveller, is originally from the Highveld. She qualified as a teacher and taught for 11 years, before she and her husband bought on auction, in 1994, a small country hotel. This hotel is situated in a quiet little South African village, and provides inspiration for stories.

Marina Chichava is a Mozambican anthropologist, poet, musician and writer. She co-founded the poetry ensemble Lagama, which has led to the growth of the spoken-word/slam poetry movement among young people in her home town of Maputo, Mozambique. Marina is also the lead singer and songwriter of local band The Rocats. She has performed in and around Mozambique, where she works in the field of HIV/AIDS and child protection. Marina is at present at the University of Cape Town doing her Masters in Social Anthropology.

Tinashe Chidyausiku lives and works in Harare, Zimbabwe. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Humanities from Africa University, Mutare, Zimbabwe, where she majored in English. She works currently as a high school teacher, teaching English literature and history.

Erika Coetzee is a freelance researcher and writer living in Cape Town, South Africa. She works mainly as a materials' developer, in collaboration with non-governmental organisations in South Africa and internationally, focussing mainly on democracy, human rights and development. She also writes learning materials for schoolchildren and youth in the areas of social science and history, and has co-authored 10 text books for various educational publishers. She holds a Masters degree in Philosophy from Stellenbosch University.

Joanne Fedler's books have sold more than 180 000 copies worldwide. She is a former women's rights advocate and CEO of a not-for-profit advocacy centre. She writes for *Vogue*, teaches life-writing classes and is a motivational speaker. She has worked to raise money for abused women, breast cancer research and post-natal depression. Her latest book *When Hungry, Eat*, published 2010, is a spiritual memoir about losing weight, immigrating and the gifts of hunger. She is originally South African, and lives now in Sydney, Australia.

Melissa Gardiner grew up in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. She began writing at an early age, which culminated in her studies towards a degree in Journalism and Media studies at Rhodes University, where she graduated in 2007. Melissa is currently writing her first novel.

Rosemund Handler holds a Masters degree in creative writing from the University of Cape Town. She has written stories and poems for many years, published in South Africa and in the US, where she lived for fourteen years. Her novels include *Madlands* (2006), *Katy's Kid* (2007), and *Tsamma Season* which was published to great acclaim in 2009, and is currently short-listed for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. She now lives in Cape Town, South Africa.

Joanne Hichens holds a Masters degree in Creative Writing from the University of Cape Town. She co-authored a crime novel, *Out To Score* (2006), has authored the teen novel, *Stained*, short-listed for the Sanlam Youth Literature award and published in 2009 as part of the Ransom Press Cutting Edge series. She has written for a number of magazines, newspapers

and anthologies, and has edited various works including the first SA crime-fiction short story collection *Bad Company* (2009).

Romaine Hill lives in the Strand, in the Western Cape, South Africa. She has worked as a freelance consultant editor for the last 15 years, having worked for 15 before that on a Law Journal at UNISA, as well as various other on-campus publications. She writes fiction and paints as a personal means of expression.

Liesel Jobson is a writer, photographer and bassoonist. She is the author of *100 Papers*, a collection of prose poems and flash fiction, and a volume of poetry, *View from an Escalator*, both published in 2008. She won the POWA Women's Writing Poetry (2005), the Ernst van Heerden Creative Writing Award (2005) and the Faye Goldie Award (2006). She edits Poetry International South Africa, and lives in Cape Town, South Africa.

Lauri Kubuntuile is a full-time writer living in Botswana. She has had published three children's books, two detective novellas, and three collections of short stories for children, co-written with two other Botswana writers. She was the 2007 winner of the BTA/Anglo Platinum Short Story Contest and the recipient of the Botswana Ministry of Youth and Culture's Orange Botswana Award for Creative Writing in the same year. In 2009 she won the Baobab Literary Prize (USA) in the junior category.

Sarah Lotz, has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Cape Town. She won the *Something Wicked* launch issue horror story competition and the SAFM 2007 Fiction Competition, and has been anthologised in *Open*, a collection of erotic short stories by women writers. Her first novel, *Pompidou Posse*, was published in 2008, followed by *Exhibit A* (2009) and *Tooth and Nailed* (2010), all published by Penguin. She lives in Cape Town, and is currently working on the script team of South Africa's first full-length animated show, *URBO: The Adventures of Pax Afrika*.

Nia Magoulani-McGregor, a Rhodes University graduate, went back to journalism after getting divorced at 40. She has worked as a radio news presenter, a scriptwriter, and sub-editor, and was, for a number of years, the Johannesburg bureau chief for *Femina* magazine. Born and bred in Sea Point, she moved to Johannesburg, South Africa during the eighties, and is now a freelance writer and lives and works in Killarney.

Bronwyn McLennan lives in Observatory, Cape Town. She works part-time at a publishing house as an editor and submissions officer, she also

sub-edits for *Wordsetc* literary magazine, and edits fiction, biographies and some non-fiction for various publishers on a freelance basis. Her writing has been published in magazines, textbooks and literary journals.

Luso Katali Mnthali, originally from Malawi, holds a BA in English language and literature from Southern Illinois University in the USA, and in 2008 obtained an LLB from the University of Pretoria. Apart from working as a radio newsreader, she has written for *Cosmopolitan*, 'O' – Oprah Magazine, *Marie Claire*, *True Love*, *Move* and *Cleo*, and is a regular contributor to *New African Woman Magazine*, artsreview.co.za and the Huffington Post.

Gothataone Moeng, based in Gaborone, Botswana, holds a Media Studies degree from the University of Botswana. She worked in the Gaborone production office during the filming of *The No.1 Ladies Detective Agency*. Her story 'Singing in the Rain' was published in *Mslexia* magazine and in the anthology *Lemon Tea and Other Stories from Botswana*. 'Who knows What Season Tomorrow Brings' was published in the anthology *A Long Time Coming*. She is currently a television scriptwriter.

Karabo Moleke, born in Diepkloof, Johannesburg, holds a diploma in Food Services Management, from University of Johannesburg's School of Tourism. She is currently studying towards her Masters degree in Business Administration, whilst working in the TV & Film industry as an Office and HR Manager. She was previously affiliated to *bko*, a magazine/poetry movement led by Phehello Mofokeng and has performed a number of her pieces at book launches and poetry sessions under their banner. She was part of a group of 16 up-and-coming poets who performed at the 16 days of activism celebrations in Newtown in 2006.

Isabella Morris lives in Johannesburg, and holds a Masters degree in Creative Writing from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. She has published short stories and essays in *Wordsetc*, *Baobab*, *New Contrast* and *African-Writing*. She received an honourable mention from JM Coetzee for her short story which was a finalist in the Pen/Studzinski 2009 Award. She won the POWA women's short story competition in 2007. She has been invited to attend the El Gouna Writers Residency in Egypt during 2010 where she will start work on her next novel.

Claudie Muchindi has lived in her home country of Zambia (Kitwe and Lusaka), Mozambique (Maputo), Botswana (Gaborone), Tanzania (Dar-es-salaam) and South Africa (Pretoria and Cape Town). She is completing

a B.Com Economics degree with the University of South Africa. She has turned to writing express herself, in both poetry and prose.

Pamela Newham worked as a librarian in a newspaper library and taught English for several years before moving into the world of journalism. She has worked on various national magazines as features writer, mainly *Pace* where she was the education editor. She is now a freelance writer, based in Hout Bay, South Africa. Her first children's book published 2010 by Maskew Miller Longman is titled *Three Blind Dates*.

Rose Richards studied literature at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. She now lives near Cape Town, and works at Stellenbosch University, developing students' writing. Rose has published short stories in different types of publications, including *New Contrast*, *Kynapipi* (an Australian journal of postcolonial languages and literatures) and LitNet. She is currently working on a larger project that involves both formal academic research and personal writing.

Megan Ross was born in Johannesburg but grew up in Gonubie, a coastal suburb in East London, South Africa. She is currently studying for a Bachelor of Arts degree at Rhodes University, majoring in English, Journalism, and Media Studies. Megan wants to travel the world, and write a best-selling novel.

Margot Saffer, a writer and poet, grew up in Johannesburg and always had a love of words and of writing. Although Margot's life is now in a state of transition, recently, whilst living in Cape Town, she worked towards the completion of an MPhil in Life-Writing from the University of Stellenbosch. Her poetry, prose, and academic work have been published both locally and overseas.

Arja Salafranca has published two collections of poetry, *A Life Stripped of Illusions*, which received the Sanlam Award for poetry and *The Fire in which we Burn*. Her fiction has been published in local and international journals and anthologies, as well as online. She has participated in a number of writers' conferences and participated in Poetry Africa in 2007. An anthology of prose and poetry, *Glass Fars Among Trees*, which she edited with the poet Alan Finlay, was published in 2003. Her debut collection of stories, *The Thin Line*, was published by Modjaji Books in 2010. She lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Sylvia Schlettwein is a graduate of the University of Cape Town where she studied German and French. Sylvia completed her Masters degree in 2002, at the University of Stuttgart, before returning to Southern Africa. Sylvia lives in Windhoek, Namibia, where she runs her own language centre at which she teaches German, English, Afrikaans and French, to adults and children.

Ginny Swart lives in Cape Town, South Africa, and writes more or less full time. She's had a book for teenagers published by Macmillan Boleswa SA and three romances by Ulverscroft UK. But she mostly writes short stories and over the past eight years has had over 350 accepted by women's magazines, text books, literary magazines and anthologies. These have been translated into German, Norwegian, Swedish, Thai and 'American'. She also tutors the Short Story course for the SA Writers College on-line.

Novuyo Rosa Tshuma, currently studying at the University of the Witwatersrand, is from Zimbabwe. Her short stories have been published in various anthologies produced there, including a short story in the upcoming *Story Time African Roar* Anthology. She won third prize in the Intwasa Short Story Competition 2008. Her short story 'You In Paradise' won the Intwasa Short Story Competition 2009, and is published in the eighth issue of *African Writing Online*. She participated in the Caine Prize Workshop 2010.

Helen Walne is an award-winning columnist and writer living in Cape Town, South Africa. Her columns have appeared in various magazines and newspapers, including the *Sunday Times*, *Mail & Guardian* and *Fair Lady*. Her poetry has appeared in anthologies such as *Fidelities*. She is currently working on her first book.

Anne Woodborne was born in Cape Town, South Africa, where she is now based, but spent a large part of her childhood in Scotland and Nigeria. Her writing has appeared in women's magazines, and in three anthologies – *A woman sits down to write ...*, *Women Flashing*, and *Writing the Self*. She has completed a first novel, as well as having written and illustrated two children's books for her grandchildren.

Other Modjaji Titles

Whiplash

by Tracey Farren

Invisible Earthquake

A Women's Journal Through Stillbirth

by Malika Ndlovu

Hester se Brood

Hester van der Walt

This Place I Call Home

by Meg Vandermerwe

The Thin Line

by Arja Salafranca

Undisciplined Heart

by Jane Katjavivi



<http://modjaji.book.co.za>

The bed, dressed in hand sewn quilt or threadbare blanket, may in and of itself be memorable, but it is what happens in the bed – the sex and lovemaking, the dreams, the reading, the nightmares, the rest, giving birth and dying – which give 'bed' special meaning. Whether a bed is shared with a book, a child, a pet or a partner, whether lovers lie in ecstasy or indifference, whether 'bed' relates to intimacy or betrayal, it is memories and recollections of 'bed', in whatever form, which have triggered the writing of these thirty stories by women from southern Africa.

Well known writers Joanne Fedler, Sarah Lotz, Arja Salafranca, Rosemund Handler and Liesl Jobson will delight, but you will discover here new writers from Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Namibia and Zambia, each with a unique voice as they cast light on the intimate lives of women living in this part of the world and the possibilities that are both available to and denied them.

The BED BOOK of short stories – some quirky and tender, others traumatic or macabre – is the perfect companion to take to bed with you, to keep you reading long into the night.

• Ellen Banda-Aaku • Jayne Bauling • Rita Britz • Marina Chichava •
Tinashe Chidyausiku • Erika Coetzee • Joanne Fedler • Melissa Gardiner
• Rosemund Handler • Joanne Hichens • Romaine Hill • Liesl Jobson •
Lauri Kubuitsile • Sarah Lotz • Nia Magoulani-McGregor • Bronwyn McLennan
• Luso Katali Mnthali • Gothataone Moeng • Karabo Moleke • Isabella Morris
• Claudie Muchindi • Pamela Newham • Rose Richards • Megan Ross •
Margot Saffer • Arja Salafranca • Sylvia Schlettwein
• Ginny Swart • Novuyo Rosa Tshuma •
Helen Walne • Anne Woodborne



ISBN 978-1-920397-31-9



9 781920 397319

